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editorial

HEREWITH an exchange of views between Ben Bova, author of the recent series on Planetary Engineering, and N.L. Mr. Bova's comments came in the form of a letter to the editor. My rejoinder follows his letter, below:

"I guess I shouldn't be baited so easily, but Norman Lobsenz's editorial comment about the moral right of re-shaping Mars to our own needs and taking the planet away from its original inhabitants is too juicy to pass up.

First: As I said in the final paragraph of "Operation Shirt-sleeve," it's up to the men who get to Mars to decide what they want to do with it. Certainly there will be the interplanetary litterbugs and landscape-wreckers who won't mind tearing the planet apart just for the fun of it. Remember Ray Bradbury's story on this issue in *The Martian Chronicles*? But there may be very legitimate—even compelling—reasons that will make

the transformation of Mars necessary. We don't know, and we won't know for many decades. The object of the piece I wrote was to show that if it becomes desirable to do such a job—we can envision the techniques for doing it, even at this rather primitive stage of the game.

Second: If Mr. Lobsenz is going to make moral judgments, where does he rank man in comparison to the rather low forms of plant life usually presumed to exist on Mars? If you carry his argument far enough, you come away as an anti-vivisectionist.

Third: Assuming the worst, that man takes over Mars and re-makes it in the image of his own Earth, we are merely repeating a biological drama that has been replayed since the beginning of life in the solar system. You can go right back to the first primitive organisms, and continue through to today. Mammals replaced reptiles because they

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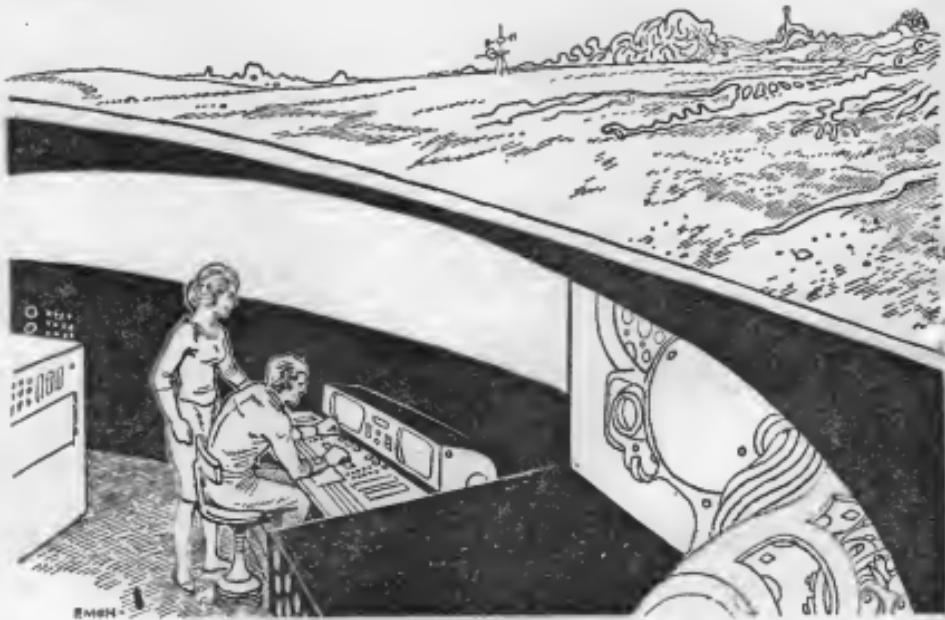
ENIGMA FROM TANTALUS

By JOHN BRUNNER

Part One of Two Parts

It was not surprising, really, when the Tantalan masqueraded itself aboard the Earth-bound spaceship—after all, for the 40 years that Terran scientists had been studying it, the Tantalan had quietly been doing the same thing in reverse.

Illustrated by EMSH



ON all of Tantalus there were either seventy-nine or eighty minds. Harry Gamaliel had never been able to decide which figure was correct. There was no possible doubt about the current total of seventy-eight human beings on the planet; there was even less doubt about the Tantalan itself. But as to this thing here . . .

Shivering in the cool dawn air at the entrance to the high long data-analysis hall, he found the question disturbing him anew.

We aren't studying the Tantalan. How could we—humans, in-

dividuals? We aren't built to that scale!

He moved forward slowly between the man-tall memory banks: entropy tracking, chemical movement, chemical analysis, gross-physical mass-location, micro-physical mass-location . . . How did it feel to exist in such complex extension? Like God, omnipresent, imminent?

Parasite.

He slapped the thought down, conscious that his confidence was already at an excessively low level, and paused as he arrived be-



fore the display panels. A hundred square feet of calibrated dials, gauges with pointers, yes-no lights shining red, white, green, continuous-variable meters, integrated resultant curves.

Eighty minds. This monstrous machine, spread over nearly as much of the planet's surface as the Tantalan itself, must have passed the indefinable point at which awareness set in. It considered, evaluated, made decisions; it communicated, asked questions, sensed its environment—what more was required of a mind?

Yet the pretence had to be maintained. Sighing, he let his eyes rove across the display board. The machine was telling him everything it knew, as usual, and as usual he would have to ask for it all to be explained, and as usual Lynette was keeping him waiting.

He was tempted to start work anyway, but there was no point in going through the whole elaborate process twice. Restless, he turned aside to a spiralling staircase at the end of the hall and climbed it, his feet hushing on the soft thick plastic pad of each step. At the top he emerged into a gallery with continuous windows on either side; the view was of pale blue sky, translucent like deep water, and forests and fields and distant hills under a yellow

sun of the right size, the right brilliance and spectral type . . .

Voidech was right. Tantalus was the only possible name.

Far to the left from where he stood, a herd of grubbers moved into sight, a cell of the Tantalan urging them along towards water. A frown creased his rather sallow forehead. The development of grubbers was currently occupying a good deal of his attention. The Tantalan's interest in inorganic mining was a post-contact phenomenon. When men first reached this world, the master of it was concerned entirely with organic substances, especially living ones; now there were the grubbers, secreted rather than bred in modified exowombs, and the hills on the horizon were ridged with exploratory tunnels. And there were the salamanders, too—Voidech's expedition had done a remarkably complete survey considering the limitations of their equipment, and surely they couldn't have overlooked the salamanders if they had already been developed.

Fire and iron . . . ?

No, there was no comparison between the subjective experience of the Tantalan and the human concept of divine awareness. There was no human standard to go by at all. The apparent intelligence of the Tantalan was unalarming—it was measurable on a human scale. It was just the

breadth of it which was beyond human grasp.

He closed his eyes, trying to imagine how it would feel to be conscious of a little finger out of sight beyond the horizon. He had tried a thousand times, and always failed.

LYNETTE Guignard/Gamaliel came into the data-analysis hall wiping a trace of morning coffee from her upper lip. She was a handsome, rather than a pretty, woman; she had a high forehead as white as pearl and brilliant, deep-set eyes. Looking at her, people concentrated on these two features which seemed to hold the clue to her personality, ignoring her thin-lipped mouth and rather masculine jaw. She moved with athletic grace down the spinal way of the hall, peering ahead in the expectation of seeing Harry by the display board.

"Harry?" she called in her soft clear voice, and a moment later, realizing, added, "Are you up in the gallery?"

A sound of footsteps, and her husband appeared at the head of the stairway.

"Sorry! Didn't hear you come in."

She gave him an understanding smile. "Back at the usual game—trying to think yourself into Tantalan shoes?"

He forced a grimace by way of

reply; then, as though against his will, followed the idea through, his eyes reverting to the dials and meters on the display board. "Lyn, how could you infer the use of writing if you were blind and had to deduce the existence of light from heat-patterns on your skin? Are we any better equipped to tackle this job?"

"You spent too much time with that horrible man Caversham," Lynette told him in a practical tone. "You let him infect you with his cynical dislike of people, and it's got you down."

"You don't do him justice," Harry countered. "Veliz liked to make him out a pathological misanthrope, but he's not. He's—" He checked, groping in the air for the right word. "He's a question-putter," he finished lamely. "And the questions he asks don't happen to be palatable ones. They're still valid."

"I'm glad Veliz sent him packing," Lynette said firmly. "I never could work out why they let him come here in the first place. They might as well have sent us that dreadful missionary woman who was on the ship—no, cancel that; I guess you'd have wound up wondering if the Tantalan was the Beast with seven horns, or something." She blunted the sarcasm with an affectionate pat on his arm, and nodded at the display board. "Shall we start?"

Harry shrugged and complied, dropping into one of the two operator's chairs facing the panels. "Caversham was brought here for the same reason they took the passengers from the ship over the whole set-up before they lifted again: on the off-chance. We have no better principle to go by, after all. *Something* welds the Tantalan into a functioning whole, and so far we have a word for it: telepathy. An empty box!"

"A black box," Lynette murmured, taking the second chair.

"What?" Reaching for the detail-examination switches, Harry gave her a sidelong glance.

"A black box. Forgotten your history of physics course?"

"Oh yes, I remember!" He turned the phrase over in his mind. "Apt, I guess . . . Lyn, doesn't it ever bother you—the frustration of it, not even being able to find a point of attack?"

"Not really." Lynette chuckled. "I still maintain Caversham got at you! It took us millennia to make sense of our own mental processes, so it's bound to take a good long time to evaluate the first non-human intelligence we run across. And we came to it, remember. We're here on Tantalus, and before we arrived the Tantalan hadn't even solved the problem of crossing the equatorial ocean."

"I wonder why we had to strike a bargain with it if we're

so superior," Harry said sourly.

"Harry!" Genuinely shocked, Lynette swivelled her chair to face him. "What would you rather we did? Blackmailed it into letting us stay here? Wiped it out so we could steal its planet?"

"I'm sorry," Harry muttered. "Perhaps you're right about Caversham's effect on me. Let's get to work, shall we?"

HE pushed home the master switch. With patronizing ease and speed the machine proceeded to take apart the overall pattern of the past day's events and display it detail by petty detail.

Routine, routine, routine. The Tantalan's standard summer growth rate had been maintained, and the entropic and organic consumption readings were correspondingly up. Some breeding going on: basic units, grubbers, salamanders, foresters, farmers and herd-masters predominated, with a slight peak in the curve for soldier-cells to replace the loss sustained from a recent bearhound raid. There was also a slight rise in the total of exowombs used for "brain-cells", but this merely reflected the expansion going on on the southern continent, across the equatorial ocean. There, the Tantalan was not yet sufficiently well established to support the immensely complex supply network required

by exowombs secreting brain-cells.

"I suppose we'd better set up some transportation for those," Harry said meditatively. "Apart from that, it looks like just another day. Sometimes I wonder if I'm not afraid of any major breakthrough—I'm so conditioned to this monotonous pattern we have . . . Lyn?" He snapped his head around, belatedly realizing that she was doing something out of the ordinary run.

In fact, she was holding a minor section of the chemical activity scan for further study, and her high white forehead was traced with the lines of a frown. She said after a pause, "Harry, I'm getting ozone traces where there ought not to be any. Look."

She switched the data across to his half of the board and added geographical co-ordinates. They identified a large hollow mound about forty miles distant: a commonplace formation of the type which served the Tantalan as stores for its exowombs. This one was secreting grubbers, according to Harry's recollection; there had been difficulty in keeping scanner gear working in the vicinity because the larval grubbers cut their teeth—literally—on any hard substances they could find, especially metal.

"Ozone?" he said. "Why is that odd? The Tantalan uses it for

gene-mutation, and that's an exo-womb station—"

"But the grubbers are breeding true now," Lynette cut in. "Think they're being modified further? If so, that's the first sign we've had."

Harry shrugged. "Okay, chase it if you like."

"I'm sorry—I have a hunch about it," Lynette declared in a don't-contradict-me voice.

"Hunch! And you complained about Caversham and his half-baked mystical taradiddle! All right, *all* right." Harry punched the code for anomaly-scan, and in a fraction of a second an anomaly came up on the board, huge and glaring.

"Cobalt!" they said together in astonishment. "But—"

Their heads turned; their eyes met. They both knew perfectly well that cobalt was one of the trace elements not involved in Tantalan bio-economy. It was only a little less common here than on Earth, but that slight difference had been enough to exclude it from protoplasm even in such small degree as terrestrial life required of it, as in cobalocyanamin.

"What's the betting," Harry said very slowly, "that there isn't a scanner anywhere near that mound?"

"There isn't one in working order for half a mile in any direction," Lynette muttered. "Those

damned grubbers . . ." She ordered the machines to locate the nearest working scanner, and was on the point of instructing it to move towards the mound when Harry checked her.

"Route it through the effluent-flow," he suggested.

"Sensible," Lynette approved, and amended her original command so that the scanner would approach the mound by way of the stream which served as a sewer or a vein according to which view one was currently taking of the Tantalan's metabolism.

Five eternal minutes. The scanner reached the edge of the water and dipped samples of it. Analysis took seconds, and presentation of the results microseconds. Aghast, they read the incredible facts from the board.

"That's not grubber material," Lynette said positively.

"I can see that," Harry grunted. "What is it?" And, without waiting for her opinion, asked the machine.

The machine said it was human.

There was a period of echoing silence. Lynette ended it with an attempt at gallows humor.

"So that's what it did with Vi-valdi's body!"

"No, it's not!" Harry rapped. "Look at the order of probability—it's below point nine. The ma-

chine is saying it's human because it's not type-Tantalan."

"Contamination? I mean, if the Tantalan has been analyzing the body—"

Harry was already out of his chair. He said over his shoulder, striding away down the hall, "An unscheduled ship was through here the other day, damn it! I'm not taking any outside chances!"

Five seconds to absorb the implications; then Lynette was overtaking him out of the hall.

II

"—And a bosun tight and a midshipmite—"

The captain of the interstellar liner *Fulmar* was almost all the crew as well, and reminded himself of the fact occasionally.

"—And the crew of the captain's gig!" A standing joke among starship captains. Where had it come from? No one bothered to remember. It was hardly even funny to laymen, let alone starship captains. But for the latter it had never been funny, it had never been meant to be funny.

"And the captain," he said very loudly to the attentive walls of his stateroom. He drew himself up in front of the variwall, currently at a mirror setting, and approved his appearance in much the same frame of mind as a shy boy into whom had been

drummed the high status of his rich grandfather—no, grandmother—and who was about to meet the old woman for the first time. It wasn't the first time, because he had been to Earth often before, and she was the grandmother—crotchety, but *there*. His mind filled with a vague, fuzzy concept, half pictorial, half tactile: something connected with shrivelled loins . . . ? He triggered the infrared setting of the mirror, and approved himself again: stark naked but for the tail of an animal from the high-gravity planet mockingly named Sisyphus, coiled around his neck and waist, and a thin layer of paint on his belly. He was quite mad at present, since starship crew could not sleep during a voyage and so needed a substitute for dreaming as a safety-valve for the tensions built up by continual infallibility.

"My compliments to your captain, Captain Wong," he said with tremendous dignity. "Tell Captain Wong, Captain Wong, that he keeps a damned fine ship."

His madness was accurately rationed by the ship. In about five minutes they would broach normal for Earth, and he would have to return to duty, hating it; Earth in the sky disturbed him, and he would not go down to her surface again. Like the crotchety grandmother, impossible to love,

who once had given messy birth, blood-leaking, to the loved, adored, desired mother.

* * *

"Are you not going to the observation saloon to watch the breakthrough into normal space?" Tanya Hesit asked. She was still on speaking terms with Caversham; after all, he had been on Tantalus for quite a long time, and there might be copy to be milked from him . . . At the very least, a damaging passage of satire, subtly planned so that the arbitrating computers would assess the resemblance at less than point five—ideally, at point four nine—but people everywhere would know who was meant and hence snigger to themselves . . .

Caversham raised his half-full glass and inspected the contents critically. "Why bother? Still, if it amuses you to supervise the infallible working of the machinery—pretend you're still the godling running the universe—I won't stand in your way. This bar is so superbly revolting I shall savour my last few minutes in it."

The bar was decorated in a style halfway between Chinoiserie and Formal Martian, and the first time he discovered it he laughed for three minutes by the clock, helplessly; since then he had passed almost the whole of the voyage here.

Abruptly Tanya Hesit realized that all her attempts to needle him had failed, whereas his attempts to provoke her were working every time. She spun on her heel and marched out, determined that under no circumstances was her new travelogue going to contain a reference to Caversham.

Before she reached the observation saloon, she had had to reconsider. How the blazes could she omit her meeting with him from the story? She'd been on Tantalus a matter of some hours, like everyone else aboard. Caversham had been there working on a project, for months, and she was the only other passenger who had put up with him after a first meeting . . .

Blazes. She scowled and drew her red lounging suit an inch higher on her carefully maintained bosom. It had had no impact on Caversham at all, and that was perhaps the most disturbing matter on her mind.

BELoved Sister Dorcas was in her cabin, on her knees. The voyage-calendar was ticking away the time towards breakthrough, and she was terrified. Eyes as tight as though sealed with wax, guts churning, she prayed aloud.

"Let us survive to close the circle, Thou who came from the end of all things to the beginning of

all things! Let the ship not fail on this voyage so small compared with Thy marvellous journey down the millenia!"

On the narrow junkshelf beside the comfortable bed—which she had not used—a symbolic stereocube glowed softly. It represented the Closing of the Circle. She was forbidden naturalistic images, but this was dear to her because if she looked into it from a certain angle it suggested . . . Guilty, she redoubled the intensity of the prayer, words tumbling from her lips. But her stomach was in turmoil. All of a sudden she scrambled up and vanished into the tiny adjacent service compartment. She continued to pray while the necessary function was performed, so as not to think of an unhygienic subject.

* * *

The others were already gathered. There was Florens, the unofficial diplomat from Valhalla: by far the smallest man on the ship, like most of his people rather fat, and clad in an aggressive green which made him look like a sour apple. He was determined not to be impressed by anything encountered here or on Earth. He was in a commanding position, and he knew it. Valhalla's century-past snubbing of Earth had been a thorn in the flesh of the parent world for much too long; they would fawn on him to help have it removed.

With him was a woman who passed as his wife, and was entered on the passenger list as Nia Welk Florens. Tanya Hesit had satisfied herself after an hour's close observation that the two were not married; they were the next thing to strangers. She had debated whether to gossip about it or keep the fact for release in her next travelogue. Boredom had persuaded her to the first course. After all, a tiny scandal involving an outworld diplomat was hardly worthy of inclusion in a Hesit production. A major scandal . . . She had debated whether to seduce Florens so that the woman could surprise them together, because Valhallaans were notoriously violent, but the idea of this plump, dull woman living up to the tradition was so unlikely she had refused to entertain it. Besides, she couldn't spare the time for hospitalization. Even a day lost would be disastrous.

There was Relly, tall and stooped: a scientist of some kind. He had spent most of the voyage shut in his cabin with a portable computer buzzing like a flight of maddened bees. That was no bother to Tanya Hesit—she had the cabin furthest distant from him. They had exchanged a couple of dozen polite sentences in the four days of the trip. Scientists were hardly of interest to anyone but themselves.

Relly had talked a little with one of his companions: Waters, the communications engineer, who had been out at Valhalla. Tanya Hesit had done her best to find out why he refused to talk to Florens, and failed. She was sure the failure was Caversham's fault. She could not explain why she suspected anything so absurd, and preferred to dismiss the matter as wounding to her vanity.

Last, there was Hazel Graubart, a slender woman with a drawn face and fever-bright eyes. She had bought herself out of a colonization contract, and made no secret of the reason—she had hated life on Sequoia so much that for a full decade she had starved herself of all but necessities to get out of the place. She planned to scream about the way she had suffered when she landed back on Earth. It would take her a month or so to scream loud enough to be heard. It would take Tanya Hesit about two to three days.

The time to broach normal was close now; the shades had withdrawn from the huge main viewport, and there was only the velvet-black of subspace beyond. A little recovered from her fit of anger at Caversham, Tanya elbowed a chair control and dropped into the form-fitting shape as it rose from the floor, and looked across with malice at Relly.

"Is it true that starship captains are all insane?" she inquired loudly.

Heads jolted around. Florens' "wife" put her hand to her mouth, cancelled the gesture uncompleted.

"Why—ah—yes," Relly said. "I believe so. It's not my field, of course . . ." He let the words trail away.

"Your field!" said Waters with a slight sneer. "If it weren't for people like me, my friend, you'd have fenced in your fields by now so thoroughly you couldn't talk to anybody at all. As it is, you don't make a very good job of what communication you do achieve."

He bent a brilliant smile on the company. He was rather a good-looking man, of young middle age, with dark red hair sleek on his scalp. "Starship crews can't sleep during their voyages, of course, and sleep offers a chance to relax from the strain of conscious thought. It's substituted for by a carefully measured ration of imbalance, you see."

"So that's why we're missing one of the happy band of brothers and sisters," Florens grunted. He was given to these mocking remarks, as a kind of armor against seeming to be impressed. "She's probably praying he recovers before we broach."

"I doubt if it would make much odds, actually," Relly said.

Waters had nettled him, but he had taken a few moments to organize his next statement. "There has been some thought given to abandoning the use of crews. The machinery of a modern ship is perfectly infallible."

Tanya Hesit was annoyingly reminded of Caversham's crack about supervising the operation of that machinery. She distracted herself with a glance at the voyage-calendar beside the viewport.

The day counter read zero. The hour counter read zero. The minute counter read zero. The second counter read zero. The voyage was over, and there was still only subspace black beyond the port.

She watched to see if it would change. It remained.

It was two minutes before any of them accepted the fact, and then Waters went storming off to look for the captain. The others waited, saying nothing, wondering whether this was doom.

Beloved Sister Dorcas peeked out between her eyelids and saw that the calendar was at zero. Relieved, but not too relieved to utter a hasty word of thanks, she got up, stretching her cramped legs. She moved to the door.

She emerged into the corridor just in time to block Waters's path; he collided with her, and in swearing at her for her carelessness got across the essential fact

—the voyage was supposed to be over, and they had not broached normal.

Beloved Sister Dorcas was the first to scream.

III

ANGELO VELIZ, chief of Project Tantalus, was developing a permanently pinched expression. It had begun with his lips, which he habitually pursed when considering a thorny problem; in more than four years on this planet which posed him a problem without any clue to its answer, the tense drawing-together effect had spread till now it made his entire face appear to be aligned on a point somewhere in front of his nose. Suppose a sculptor had taken a tiny clay bust of him, about as large as two thumbs, and then closed three fingers on the soft material: that would have produced the identical impression.

Today was the day for progress reports—a pleasant fiction. If required, the machines at his disposal could have signalled back to Earth a complete running commentary on the situation here, without human intervention; at the terrestrial end, other machines could have processed the incoming data, asked supplementary questions, summarized the whole and filed it.

But this was not merely

wounding to vanity, part-source of the commonest nightmare of the present century: it was also a negation of the whole intention behind Project Tantalus.

The nightmare . . . He shivered a little, even though he was accustomed to leave his sleeping quarters later than the rest of the staff and had done so today, when the sun was already high and warm and the morning mists had cleared from the loathsome Earthlike landscape. He had the nightmare too. For him, it took a very specific form: he always dreamed that he was one of a horde of immobile figures, stretching from horizon to horizon, all of whom but himself were perfectly content to have every want attended to by silent, infallible machines. *Every* want, up to and including the sexual ones.

Abruptly, he would become aware of his dehumanized condition; would struggle to convey his discovery to his companions—and would find that here too the machines had encroached on humanity, so that there was no means of even speaking except by the intervention of another shiny impersonal device, which naturally censored his message.

The immobile figures never heard, and he awoke sweating.

He had hoped that on Tantalus it would not be so bad. On Tantalus they had discovered an area

of research where the machines could not go; the Tantalan was bonded into a total organism by telepathy, a—a force?—a *something* so intangible that no known mechanical detector could respond to it. Here human beings were indispensable.

Or were they?

It was a fair assumption. The Tantalan was wholly organic. Its planet was so like Earth that here they were, able to walk in its sunlight, breathing its raw air, drinking its water, even catching one or two diseases due to native germs—though since Ernesto Vivvaldi no one had actually died here. Hopeful, they had sought to respond to the engulfing waves of projected thought linking the Tantalan together, and found it as impossible as hearing a radio signal.

We've tried everything—

Angrily, he cancelled the intrusive idea. He dared not let himself think that. So far they had only tried the possibilities which occurred to them. There was no success to show yet, granted. But today or tomorrow, or next year, an inspiration might strike someone . . .

HE went on down the straight paved path connecting the living quarters with the research center. Two of the junior members of his staff were climbing aboard a flitter, and paused to

wave him good morning more from politeness than goodwill. Off to the southern continent, of course. A self-powered porter was loading a consignment of scanners into the open metal-mesh junkbags slung below the cabin of the flitter. More information for the computers . . .

Why had they used such dogmatic straight lines when laying out this site? As a gesture of assertive humanity, to contrast with the biologically-shaped patterns of the Tantalan? Could be. But the site had been laid out by Voidech on his second trip, well before Veliz's time, and it had never occurred to him to check up before.

No, we haven't tried everything. Maybe, indeed, we've been trying too hard. Some of our wild notions have come close to frustrating our whole research program.

Like having Caversham here, for instance. It was a reasonable assumption that a person with rudimentary so-called "psi" talent ought to be exposed on Tantalus, like a litmus paper, to see if he was sensitized to this mysterious telepathic signal. Some of the permanent staff were here for just that reason—they were no more skilled or brilliant than a thousand others, but showed a plus factor, an *x*, which was imperfectly definable and so might relate to what they were trying

to investigate. But Caversham had been a total failure.

Veliz passed his hand across his forehead, wondering if he had been correct to take that abrupt decision to send him away. He had felt comforted once he had done so; he had exerted his power of choice as a free individual, he imagined. Only now, a few days later, the sense of doing right was fading.

Conceivably, he was utterly wrong. Conceivably he was shying away from the very thing he was hunting. Yet the deranging effect Caversham had had on some of the most valuable staff members, like Harry Gamaliel, surely outweighed all other considerations . . .

Anyway, this was a long job. The final results might not be in in his own lifetime.

He quickened his pace as he came abreast of the entrance to the data-analysis building, a low grey structure with a line of windows completely encircling it just below the roof, and turned sharp right towards his own working quarters, the master office which shared its roof with the communications room.

He halted, startled, in the entranceway. The door of the master office was closed and still locked: a habit, even though in almost forty years the Tantalans had never attempted to intrude here or into any other of the hu-

man buildings. But the door of the communications room was open, and Lynette and Harry Gamaliel were visible in there—which was completely wrong, since they ought still to have been in data-analysis—and so was Geza Randolph, which was right . . . But there was absolutely no mistaking the circuit they were using. They were linked to Earth, and a sober-faced man dressed in the stark black of an executive rank far too high to bother about attracting attention by wearing colorful clothes was listening to them with mingled concentration and dismay.

Exactly as Veliz digested the spectacle and made to utter his incredulous questions, this black-garbed man said, "Very well. We shall act instantly. I shall leave this circuit open with star priority while I notify the Powers of Earth."

What?

Veliz strode forward. The screen blanked. Geza Randolph, a wiry man with a wrinkled face and greying hair, shot an apologetic look at his chief as though to say, "I couldn't stop them!" And Lynette and Harry seemed to slump as if life had gone out of them.

"What's all this about?" blasted Veliz.

The two who should not have been here grew aware of his pres-

ence. They exchanged glances, reluctant to speak; then Harry said shortly, "The Tantalan is loose, chief."

"I don't understand." Veliz considered the facts as he had them: contact with Earth, reference to the Powers . . .

"That's not clear, Harry," Lynette said, and went on, addressing Veliz, "What he means, chief, is that there's an exowomb station about forty miles from here which we assumed to be secreting grubbers—because all our attempts to establish scanners permanently in the neighborhood were frustrated when grubbers started chewing on them. Only it wasn't grubbers the Tantalan was breeding there. It was a man."

VELIZ listened to silence for the space of four heartbeats. He gulped enormously, swallowing as well as breathing air, and said, "You've been through to Earth with this transparent nonsense?"

He shot an accusing glare at Geza, who this time spoke his apology aloud: "Chief, I just couldn't stop them! They came in here like firefighters and shoved me away from the board—"

"You've been through to Earth?" repeated Veliz, ignoring the interruption.

"Of course." Harry's face was

glistening with sweat. "We had an unscheduled ship out of here the other day, remember? Routed for Earth? The one you insisted on being diverted to take away Caversham?"

"Shut up!" Veliz wiped his own face reflexively; he wasn't yet sweating, because the shock hadn't penetrated to the deep levels of his mind, but the sight of Harry's moist skin made him itch. "What facts have you got to go on?"

Lynette answered promptly. "Cobalt: it's not required in Tantalan bio-economy, but the grubbers have been mining it and it's being piped in to this exowomb station. We have traces of cobalocyanamin in the effluent flow. We have nearly a point nine correspondence to human tissue analysis in the dilute wastes. We've tried to get a scanner into the mound trice, and each time a grubber—not a larva, a grown unit—had attacked it and put it out of action. We've contributed a good deal of metal to the Tantalan's reserves this morning!" The attempt at lightness was ghastly. "We've scanned for uses of these substances here and the scan is negative. The human-type protoplasm on Tantalus is all accounted for in the bodies of the staff. That means it's gone off planet."

"The Tantalan can't yet know that we know," Harry muttered.

His mind was elsewhere. "I'm working out a confusion pattern to randomize the design of what we've done so far; we must keep it in ignorance as long as we—"

"Shut up," Veliz said again. He looked and sounded extremely frightened. "What the blazes do you mean by going to Earth on this without consulting me?"

"You weren't here!" Lynette snapped, with no pretence of courtesy. "And the *Fulmar* was due to broach normal for Earth in—" She glanced at the fundamental time meter on the communications room wall. "Any minute now," she concluded most emphatically.

"Either you're out of your minds," Veliz declared, "or—" He checked, staring at Harry. "Or," he repeated more slowly, "this is some way of getting back at me for sending Caversham away."

"Weren't you listening to anything Lynette said?" Harry half-rose from his chair before the screen.

"I heard it! And you know what they're going to say—you know it perfectly well! You're making it look as though my decision to send Caversham away was a disaster! Even when they check up and find the danger doesn't exist it'll rankle in people's minds, and that's what you want, isn't it? Discrediting me any way you can!" He clenched

his fists and took a pace towards Harry.

"Chief . . . !" Geza said faintly, and changed his mind about intervening.

"Forgotten why we're here?" Lynette said with acid sarcasm. "Forgotten why they picked Harry and me instead of any of the thousands of others who might have joined the staff? We have the *only* incontrovertible supra-rational talent. We're hunchbacks."

There was another pause.

"They haven't forgotten that on Earth," Lynette said. "Or their machines haven't. Forty years of the Tantalus Project are on record, and what we told them made them scared."

Veliz's shoulders sagged forward as if a heavy burden had been placed on him. He said, "You're saying that when the starship lifted from here the other day it took with it a—a stowaway? A unit of the Tantalan disguised as a human being?"

"No, and yes," Harry grunted. "Not a stowaway, which is impossible—a mass discrepancy that great would be instantly detected. A copy."

"But this is crazy!" Geza Randolph burst out. "The Tantalan couldn't imitate a human being! Biologically, maybe—we've seen it breed up new species like salamanders and grubbers since our arrival, I'll grant that. But to

imitate a man in conversation, in reaction to other people—no! No, it's inconceivable!"

"When we struck our bargain with the Tantalans," Harry said glacially, "we agreed to help it establish itself on the southern continent in return for facilities to study it. And for forty years we've overlooked the corollary, even though our noses were rubbed in it."

"When the Tantalans asked for, and got, Vivaldi's body, for example," Lynette said. Her voice shook.

"The Tantalans," Harry concluded, "has likewise had forty years to study us. And the way I see it, our assistance in spreading it to another continent hasn't satisfied its ambitions."

IV

THERE were, waiting in random groups around the gigantic main hall of Weshemspater-nor—Western Hemisphere Spatial Terminal North—intending colonists. They would easily be distinguished on an ordinary day from anyone else who might have business here, such as officials of the Transport Authority or people coming to greet arrivals from an outworld. Their badge was a common expression of apprehension; they were facing the moment of truth when they had to decide whether they were genu-

inely sick of being passengers in this mechanized womb-symbol, Earth, and glad to be on their way to some less demanding world.

Today, noted Master Brand, the most apprehensive people present were exactly those who normally looked calm.

They had brought him from his private estate in the Caribbean by a rocket so fast it had left a trail of law-suits impending, for damage psychological and physical. Its sonic boom had been far louder than thunder and over a thousand miles long. It was now, despite the best efforts of those escorting him, taking longer to get him from the landing-point to the Earthside epicenter of this unprecedented emergency than he had spent on the entire remainder of the trip. Someone had thought to clear his way by announcing that the bystanders must stay back "in the name of the Powers of Earth"—and of course had precipitated a surge of excitement and driven everyone under the terminal's mile-long roof to crowd towards Brand's path.

Someone dodged the guardian ranks of officials—bad at this job of crowd-control because it was such an anachronism—and leapt in front of the floating chair on which he sat, shouting, "Please! Please, Master Brand, you must tell me—!"

"Who was that?" muttered Brand over his shoulder as the offender was hauled back.

"One moment." Standing beside him was the girl who acted as his remembrancer, four-eyed because wherever she looked two lenses mounted on her forehead looked also. From the lenses threads ran back under her sleek gold hair; from the circuits traced in conductive ink on her scalp, using her body as the antenna, signals went to computer memories all over Earth and at several points elsewhere in the Solar System.

"The name is Pigoyan," the girl murmured. "Sensiservice. That'll be because of the woman aboard the *Fulmar*—Tanya Hes-
it."

"Ah yes. Ever taken any of her productions?"

A trifle startled at having such a personal question put to her when she was working, the girl hesitated. "Why—yes, I have."

"What did you think of them?"

"Very—uh—sensational," the girl said timidly.

"You have good taste," Brand told her with a wry grimace. "I believe we are finally getting through this mess, anyway. Who's that up there in executive garb?" He pointed.

"Rayt Cornelius, administrator first degree," the girl said.

"You didn't have to scan for that. Do you know him?"

"I was transferred from his department when I came to your staff."

"He lost a good aide. I hope he doesn't brood on the fact. Ah, he's seen us."

THE platform ahead, jutting from the steep arc of the dome and giving on to suites of offices beyond, grew larger. Waiting on it, Cornelius and a string of remembrancers and other aides were clearly having a difficult time containing their impatience.

They regard me as another machine, Brand reflected. And I take an unconscionable long time to scan and report on a problem.

His conveyance sensed the level of the platform, rose vertically twenty feet and locked to its edge. Brand stood up unhurried and said, "Cornelius! What have you done with the ship?"

Below, the crowd buzzed its disappointment at catching only a brief glimpse of the seldom-seen phenomenon: one of the Powers of Earth.

What did they expect? An angel with a shining halo? Or a man made over in a machine's image, perhaps? Brand turned the idea over in the back of his mind while attending to Cornelius' reply in the front.

"We did the thing which we were advised to be safest, Master Brand," Cornelius stated. "To avoid all possibility of the—ah—

spy escaping, we arrested the *Fulmar* prior to it broaching normal. The vessel is now held in subspace, and no attempt has yet been made to communicate."

"What?" Brand stepped forward as though jolted from behind. "Name of disaster, man! There's only supposed to be one 'spy' on the ship, isn't there? And there are seven or eight other free individuals trapped in there who don't know what's happened, probably being scared to death!"

Stiffly, Cornelius said, "I took the decision consistent with maximum security—"

"You mean you asked a machine how to achieve maximum security, and then did as it said. How long has it been since they were arrested, to use your term?"

"Approximately forty minutes," Cornelius answered. "I have no special reason to think that any of them will be scared to death in that space of time."

"Get in touch with the captain. Inform him that there has been a mechanical failure of some kind and that we'll release the ship from subspace shortly. In fact, hold them there as long as it takes me to review the data; I doubt if we'll have any call not to permit them to emerge into normal space and continue in orbit."

"A starship captain can scarcely have such a crude lie foisted on him," Cornelius pointed out.

"Then either find out what sort of lie is sufficiently subtle, or else simply instruct him to lie to the passengers," Brand snapped. "I'm not a machine, Cornelius! Don't expect me to do your thinking for you!"

Huffily, Cornelius turned away.

A QUARTER hour later, in the office which normally served the terminal director as a pleasant environment in which to pass his working day—exercising himself in his two hobbies of stove-cooking and metallizing flowers, by the fitments—Brand leaned back in his chair.

"My compliments, Cornelius," he said. "You indubitably acted promptly, if with no great discrimination. How did the conversation with the ship's captain go? And what's his name, by the way?"

"Horatio Wong," Cornelius answered. He was a little mollified by Brand's half hearted commendation; possibly in the interval he had thought over what he knew about the Powers of Earth and recognized the fact that they were notoriously eccentric. "And his crew is called Felicia Pannell/Wong."

"Married, hm? Unusual. Unless—oh, he's near retirement, presumably."

"Very near." Cornelius looked unhappy. "He's been being deconditioned during his past two

voyages, and this was to be his last. He's flying back to Shiozuchi and settling there."

"And we're holding him up." Brand rubbed his chin, "I grant you, that's tricky."

"Worse. He's already been held up. His ship was diverted to Tantalus on the special orders of the project chief."

"Next you'll be telling me he's had to have anti-Earth treatment as well as ordinary deconditioning."

"That's right."

"Splendid," Brand exclaimed, to the other's astonishment. "It's finally beginning to smell like a problem worthy of serious attention. I doubted it at first—after all, the notion of an alien creature successfully masquerading as a man for longer than a few days is preposterous. But this sets a very sharp time limit. Oblige me by finding out just how sharp, will you?"

"At once," Cornelius said.

As he turned to the door, however, the panel slammed back and an angry man in executive garb with Transport Authority flashes came in, face stormy.

"What the blazes is going on out there in the hall?" he demanded.

There was a moment's silence. Then Cornelius said in a reproving tone, "Director Shofee, this is Master Brand—one of the Powers of Earth!"

Shofee's aggressiveness fell from him like a cloak. He said with an obsequious bow, "I'm dreadfully sorry! I would never have . . ." The words trailed away. Meantime, however, Cornelius had looked past him, through the open door, and seen what in fact was going on in the hall to have provoked Shofee's annoyance.

A floor of precast slabs had been fitted on longerons, ten feet above the normal floor; on this basis, gangs of men with hum-
ming machines were at work, marking up positions with white paint, inscribing the curlicue traces of printed circuitry on the underside of the dome, and already heavy freight transport was sliding in on silent air cushions with computers, memory-
stores, communications equipment and other gear.

"Don't look so startled, Cornelius," Brand advised. "Even though I'm not a machine, I have a healthy respect for what machinery can do. Oh—before you go, did you persuade the captain to lie reassuringly to his passengers?"

"He agreed to do what he could," Cornelius said. "But he already has one hysterical: a Circle missionary from Bethel. And having to tell lies about his beloved vessel is going to put a bigger strain yet on his mental stability."

He went out, leaving the two men alone.

"Excuse me, Master," Shofee said timidly as Brand swung his chair back to the screen on which he had been reviewing events so far. "Is this—ah—interruption likely to go on long? Am I to make special arrangements for my own work? We have quite a busy day, what with two colony-ships scheduled to lift four and a half thousand emigrants . . . ?"

"The title 'Master' is not of my choosing," Brand said absently. "I don't much like it. Don't tack it on to every sentence, will you? The habit annoys me. As to your work: are you hungry, perhaps? Or have you a mistress to whom you promised some metallized tulips?"

Shofee colored with embarrassment.

"Master, you misinterpret—"

"Shofee, I don't give a yard of a comet's tail for the way you choose to run this terminal; so long as it works, I and everybody else in the galaxy will be well satisfied. But since the interruption is of absolutely indeterminable length—you should know that, incidentally; they don't send for me if the machines can give a projected time limit for a problem's solution—as I was going to say, since I shall be here for some while and you're nominally my host even though Cornelius is running things, you may be hap-

pier knowing what you're going to see."

"And that is—?" Shofee said nervously after a pause.

"Somebody thinking," Brand responded. "A declining habit. Do you want to make yourself useful, really? Or were you serious about being so busy with these colony-ships?"

Shofee took his time over answering. At last he said, "Well, to be honest, Master—I mean, to be quite honest! I'm not *expecting* any snags; the terminal is virtually completely automated and has been for two or three decades . . ."

"And the programs for the next few days have been prepared well in advance by the machines themselves, hm?"

"Yes."

"Splendid." Brand was keying data up to his screen as he talked, his eyes never leaving the words, figures, diagrams that flashed briefly before him. "Then you can fix me a snack. I had no breakfast, and I like stove-cooking if it's well done."

Shofee stared at him in bewilderment, but already Brand's attention was elsewhere. He had keyed the screen back to normal communication and was in circuit with a department Shofee had never heard of, identified by its visual signal as the Department of Current Locations.

"Find me Voidech," Brand

said. "The man who led the expedition which discovered Tantalus."

Three seconds. "Dead on Valhalla: a rockfall," said a musical voice.

"Damnation." Brand rubbed his chin. "Very well. Anyone from his crew will do—cancel! *Everyone* from his crew, and if they're off Earth get them to a communicator and in touch with me here."

"Action confirmed," said the sweet voice, and the screen went blank again.

BELOVED Sister Dorcas had stopped screaming by the time she came running into the observation saloon; she had gone over to a sort of animal moaning. Stumbling on the floor-long hem of her black gown, she went to the viewport and began to hammer with both fists on the smooth cold pane.

The others, their minds still blurred by the shock of the ship's failure to broach normal, stared at her for long seconds, then turned dismayed faces to each other.

"Oughtn't we to—do something?" Relly suggested at length. His protrusive Adam's apple bobbed on his thin throat.

There was no direct reply. This was an event as unexpected as the ship remaining in subspace. Tanya Hesit, who thought she

had a reaction ready for any emergency, discovered that for overt hysteria she had none. Her mind seemed to have switched itself off.

"Where's the captain?" she muttered. "Where's the crew? Why is Waters being so long?"

The communications engineer had impressed her as a capable person—indeed, that was why he had gone to find the captain before any of the rest of the passengers could think of it. Who else, then? For all her interstellar travelling, she was herself a product of tidy, organized, predictable Earth. One of the outworlders? Life was more brutal in the colonies . . .

Florens made as though to approach Sister Dorcas, changed his mind, and spoke instead of acting.

"Do you think I should go after Waters, maybe?"

A distant part of Tanya's mind registered the implication: if he was appealing for advice, Florens's mask of self-confidence was badly breached.

He was even including his "wife" in the sweeping glance he made requesting advice.

Hazel Graubart's mouth worked, suggesting that in another few minutes she would abandon her self-control and join Sister Dorcas in battering at the viewport. *At least, Tanya told herself, I can save us from having*

lunatics on our hands. She moved towards the unwilling colonial with a smile meant to be reassuring, but Hazel saw it as a threatening glower and flinched away.

The door slid back. Their heads jerked around in instant unison. But it was neither Waters returning, nor the captain come to explain their predicament. It was Caversham, his half-full glass brought from the bar still in his hand.

He was a man who gave the impression of being very big although he was no taller than either Relly or Waters. As a symbol of his disillusionment with modern times—which he never disguised in conversation, either—he had let his hair and beard grow to their natural length, and his face, tanned to the color of seasoned oak, was islanded in the waves of tawny whiskers. The beard continued down to join a mat of hair on his chest, a further gesture of revolt, since although it was common on several planets for men to expose their torsos they generally had all their facial and body hair-roots extirpated.

HE stood in the doorway for a long moment, taking in the situation. Then he gave a mutter of unverbalized annoyance, set his glass carefully down on a nearby shelf, and strode the three long paces required to bring him

within arm's reach of the sniveling Sister Dorcas. A big hand clamped on her shoulder and swung her around to face him. Briefly, her horror at being touched by a man struggled with her mindless fear; then Caversham slapped her on both cheeks, and all the color drained from them except a patch of red marking the site of contact.

“Hey!” Relly said, stepping forward. He checked uncertainly and cancelled the words he had meant to follow, for Sister Dorcas bowed her head and covered her eyes with her hands, but was suddenly silent.

“What were you all standing around helpless for?” Caversham snapped. “Waiting for some nice friendly machine to see to the problem for you?”

Sister Dorcas moved blindly to a chair—the one which Tanya had been using—dropped into it. She fumbled in the sleeve of her black gown and produced a tissue with which she dabbed at her eyes. She didn't say anything.

Stiffly, because he like all the others could not bear to seem less capable than the repulsive Caversham, Florens said, “I was under the impression that interstellar liners were equipped with medical facilities. Uh—”

“So they are!” Caversham barked. “But you have to make use of them! Did you honestly expect them to turn up of their

own accord?" He worked his mouth as though about to spit on the floor, and they all flinched, but it was only a pantomime.

"You!" he added, pointing at Tanya. "Get the crew here and we'll organize a tranquillizing shot of some kind for Dorcas."

The saloon seemed to swim around Tanya for a second. She said faintly, closing her eyes, "I'm sorry—I couldn't. I—I have a block against medication."

"What a bunch of incompetent gasbrains!" Caversham thundered. "Hysteria, phobias, panic—What *you* want is a cosy mechanical womb!"

He started towards the door, adding, "All right, just keep her calm while I go myself!"

Before he reached the threshold, however, the panel slid back once more, and in the opening was revealed the ship's crew—the other of the two responsible for its routine supervision.

"Ah, Felicia!" Caversham said with honest relief. "Can we get some treatment for this hysterical little fool here?"

Tanya looked at him. She felt obscurely guilty that neither she nor any of the other passengers bar Caversham had troubled to find out that this small auburn-haired woman had a name of her own. The crew of a starship was so much part of the vessel one came without realizing to think of them as mere equipment.

"Yes," the crew said, taking Dorcas's hand with a gentle urging movement so that she rose passively to follow. "I've activated a treatment machine. Come along, Sister Dorcas—that's right."

Hazel Graubart broke out of her apathy and leapt up. She clutched at the crew's arm.

"Name of disaster, aren't you going to tell us what's happened? Why aren't we out of subspace yet? Don't you know either?"

Florens's "wife" put her hand to her mouth, her only apparent method of responding to alarming ideas.

The crew paused. She said calmly, "There has been a mechanical fault. My husband, the captain, will come to you and explain it in a few minutes. We have contacted Earth and ways to help are being discussed."

She went out.

READY to grasp at anything which might help to restore her ordinary aggressiveness, Tanya sneered at Relly. "And you were saying they were going to do away with starship crews because the machinery was perfectly infallible! Where would we be if they'd done it already?"

Relly didn't answer, but his Adam's apple bobbed again, more violently.

"I imagine you'd be a lot more comfortable!" Caversham told



Tanya sarcastically. "You've got a mindless trust in machinery yourself, just like everyone else here."

"I resent that!" Tanya retorted.

"You have no right to!" Caversham combed at his beard with angry fingers. "I shall never get over this as long as I live—the sight of half a dozen presumably intelligent adults standing around an obvious hysterical waiting for a machine to see to her, when all it needed was a couple of slaps across the face."

"Most people don't take so readily to violence as you seem to," Florens said in a sneering tone.

"Some people," Caversham answered in a deliberate impersonation of Florens's Valhallan accent, "haven't the common sense needed to distinguish violence from force."

"There's no need to mock—" Florens began, reddening.

"I'm not trying to make you look foolish," Caversham cut in. "You've done an excellent job of your own accord."

Florens' red face turned almost purple. He drew himself up to his full height and made as though to throw himself on Caversham, fists clenched. Dismayed, his "wife" caught at him.

"You were saying something about violence?" Caversham needled gently.

"Ach!" Florens let his hands drop to his sides. "I'm not going to waste breath with you."

"Splendid," Caversham approved. "Why not simply wait for the captain and find out what's happened to the ship before you let loose your frustration on someone who isn't responsible?"

IN his full-dress uniform Captain Wong was a good deal more impressive to anyone but himself than when he stood before the variwall in his stateroom and admired himself in the mirror setting. Conscious authority surrounded him like an aura, and his mere presence seemed to reassure the passengers.

"I believe you already know," he said smoothly, bestowing a brief smile on each of them in turn, "that we have suffered a slight—ah—delay. I have been in contact with Earth to consult with those in authority, and I am sure it won't be more than a short while before we broach normal."

Caversham, eyes frosty, combed at his beard. He had his own opinion about this "mechanical fault."

"What is actually wrong?" Relly inquired.

A shadow seemed to pass over Wong's almond-eyes, unemotional face, but his voice remained absolutely even.

"I don't believe stardrive is your field, sir. And I think it would therefore be hard to make it clear."

Relly, accustomed to the isolation of one scientific discipline from another, shrugged and subsided. He peered around the saloon as though recollecting what Waters had said earlier, but the communications engineer had not returned with the captain.

"But—how long exactly?" Hazel Graubart demanded. "It's been so long since I saw Earth, and I want—"

"Yes!" Tanya chimed in. "I have a contract with Sensiservice to fulfill, and it's imperative that I should—"

"There are high officials of the Earth government waiting to confer with me at Weshemspaternor!" Florens announced, trying to make his voice compensate for his lack of inches.

Wong's mask of confidence melted like wax. Unsure of himself, he looked from one face to another of those around him. He said faintly, "Well, it's hard to be sure . . ."

"Look!"

The exclamation came from Relly. He had risen to his feet and thrown out a dramatic arm. Beyond the viewport had appeared the familiar gibbous form of a green-blue planet, and the back of space beyond was sown with comforting stars.

There was an immense collective sigh of relief.

"I presume now nothing will hinder us from landing," Relly said pompously. "As I was about to inform you, Captain, I'm pursuing a major research project and it can positively not be completed without access to Earth's facilities, so it's a matter of some urgency for me also to be on-planet."

"Ha. Ha."

The words were dropped like immense stones into the pool-still air of the saloon. The speaker was Waters, the communications engineer, who was at the door carrying a small box with wires trailing from it.

"What was that for?" Tanya demanded.

"You won't be landing anywhere just yet," Waters said to Relly. "None of us will. I was pretty mystified by this story of a mechanical breakdown, so I've been checking up." He hefted his little box. "I've spent the past half-hour successfully tapping your subspace circuits, Captain! So I know the truth, and I propose to share it with everyone."

Wong's face crumpled, like a child's about to cry.

"I thought so," Caversham murmured, his sharp eyes fixed on Waters. "Go on, man—spit it out."

The others were too tense to note the coarseness of his words.

Waters had a totally attentive audience for his message.

"We're not to land. We're to orbit in normal space, indefinitely."

Florens let out a cry. "This is absurd! Why, when they hear about it the officials waiting at the space terminal—"

"Will shut up and look happy," Waters informed him. "You see, this is being done on the direct orders of Master Brand. You don't know the name?" He glanced inquiringly around. "No? Well, he happens to be one of the Powers of Earth, and there is nobody in the galaxy to overrule him."

THREE was a need. A machine saw to it.

There was a problem. A machine solved it.

There was a wish. A machine granted it.

This was Earth, but the out-worlds were all, to a greater or lesser degree, copies of this original. Man on all his worlds was much the same, and had the same pattern of needs, problems and wishes, and because one highly-developed method of coping with them had been evolved it was easier to replicate it than start again from scratch. (How would it be done differently, anyway? Most people had no answer to that question.)

The effect was extremely comfortable, but comfort was not a perfect protection against the qualms felt by modern man. There was a sense that the ancestors who had built this fine glossy environment were superior beings; there was a great obsession with playing at pioneers and a constant trickle of departing colonists, dissatisfied with mere comfort.

Also there was the typical modern nightmare, replacing the previous archetypes of falling, drowning, floating in empty space and being overrun by horses. Now one dreamed of being powerless in the mechanical cradle of infallible machinery.

The commonest psychological problem for which people consulted therapists remained what it had been for some centuries: sexual incapacity. But the root cause had shifted subtly. It was no longer lack of personal confidence which produced the impotence or the frigidity. It was lack of social confidence.

And yet ostensibly it was not true that the ultimate authority reposed in man's machines. Above them stood the Powers of Earth, and the Powers were men and women.

"If a situation arises twice," so the saying went, "a machine can be designed to cope with it. If a situation is unique, it takes a man."

MASTER BRAND, frowning a little, chewed on the sandwich Shofee had diffidently prepared for him. The meat was natural and stove-cooked with a little salt; the bread was from field-grown grain, probably imported, and stove-baked. The meat was tough, the bread was coarse. Still, it had a certain symbolic value, and Brand's digestion was excellent—as, presumably, was Shofee's.

The more he reviewed the data on this problem, the more he was tempted to promote it in his mind to the superior status of a crisis. As he had told Cornelius in the first place, it was the pressure on Wong which was so crucial.

The captain—and the crew, but chiefly the captain—of a starship contained within himself the microcosm of the human predicament. A starship was the most complex unit of machinery ever devised by mankind. It had to exist during each voyage on two planes of reality, and in subspace most of normal space's laws—regarding transmission of energy and information, conventional solidity, and so forth—were inapplicable. The captain and crew, but once more especially the captain, had to supervise the vessel's operation from start to finish, unceasingly and with not the slightest lapse of attention. This was why they could not sleep; abstraction to a level

of reality neither in normal space nor in subspace broke the continuity. Instead, they had to relax with waking insanity, meted out to them automatically.

Their insanity took many forms, but the commonest was a tendency to anthropomorphize their whole experience. The ship became an extension of their bodies—it was indisputably an extension of their minds, anyhow, since they had to feel for its working with their subconscious awareness—and their destinations were interpreted as goals and ambitions, not places.

So with Wong. Earth was symbolized to him as a grandmother, very rich and powerful and completely overwhelming.

To fit him for retirement, he had had to undergo anti-Earth treatment. Keeping him here in orbit, with the parent world looking over his shoulder, was going to shatter him.

A tap on Brand's shoulder. Shofee: "Excuse me!" (He had cured himself of his initial repetitions of Brand's title.) "We have many complaints from local space operators regarding the presence of the *Fulmar* in orbit here."

"Am I supposed to care?" Brand grunted.

So! Those who had reported the emergency, the researchers out of Tantalus, were people to be listened to, although the proj-

ect chief (what was his name? Ah: Angelo Veliz) had messaged profuse apologies a short while later. These two, the Gamaliel couple, were hunchbacks. The obsolete word was handy for attachment by a punning link to the new referent, once there were no more cripples.

The power of drawing correct conclusions from data which a computer would reject as wholly inadequate was so far the only supra-rational talent confirmed among mankind. Others were always being hinted at, but under close inspection dissipated, as though one were to try and grasp a wisp of smoke. Brand was a hunchback himself, and had trained under somewhat similar circumstances to the Gamaliel couple, though on a human planet, not on Tantalus. Logically, the possessors of the one talent no machine could copy were the persons to set above machines and everyone else. They became, if they proved right every time, the Powers of Earth.

All right: the Gamaliels had said that a cell, or unit, or individual section, of the collective mind on Tantalus had been moulded into the shape of a man and sent to Earth aboard the *Fulmar*. Veliz was probably in such a panic not because he understood the nature of the threat, but because he had asked for the *Fulmar* to call, diverting her

from the regular Valhalla-SEQUOIA-Earth route, in order to get a man named Caversham off his neck. Caversham was that rare type in modern times, a quasi-mystic, who had been a test subject for one of the other alleged psi powers—ETP—and had been “exposed” on Tantalus even when the investigations proved negative on the continuing principle of trying anything to get at Tantalan telepathy.

Hypothesize a purpose for the Tantalan, now. Grant its innate desire to expand, like any living creature; witness its bargain with the visitors from space to help it cross the barrier of the equatorial ocean in return for allowing itself to be studied. Would it wish to spread to Earth?

Unlikely. Brand rubbed his chin. The Tantalan was very intelligent and despite its differing form used concepts of close to human type. Most probably, it was itself engaging in the study of mankind; one of its most recognizable attributes was plain curiosity. There had never been more than about eighty people on Tantalus except when a ship with passengers paid a short visit; too few to satisfy it, maybe.

ASSUME for the moment it proposed to study man in his native setting. Unquestionably it was capable of secreting a very good facsimile of a human being,

for the Gamaliels would not have sounded the alarm on flimsy evidence. It would be necessary to run gross-physical checks, of course, but they would probably show nothing. Some psychological betrayal was needed to select the copy aboard the ship from the original.

On the surface, detection should be easy. The facsimile would not be a human being. It would behave in some respect oddly. Closer examination, however, revealed that everyone aboard the *Fulmar* might be expected to act differently from a "normal" Earthborn human.

Caversham, to start with—the obvious prime suspect, in that he had been on Tantalus a long time and could most easily have served the Tantalan for a mole—was reported to make a deliberate habit of eccentricity. He was disillusioned with modern times, and enjoyed shocking those he met by insulting them or standing conventional behavior on its head.

And there was no proof that the Tantalan had needed more than the few hours the *Fulmar's* personnel had spent on its planet to put the finishing touches to its work. It might have had a sort of averaged blank prepared, awaiting an opportunity to be substituted. As to the impression of the personality on the facsimile: it did not necessarily

follow that because human minds failed to detect Tantalan telepathy the Tantalan was incapable of sensing human thoughts.

There was a whole line of research there. Brand made a mental note to have the alarming possibility cleared up as soon as he could.

The captain and crew were not exempt from suspicion. They could both be expected to show signs of abnormality, and it would take the most subtle and refined analysis to prove that it resulted purely from their conditioned, pre-planned instability.

As to the remaining passengers: there was the diplomat from Valhalla, Florens, accompanied by his wife for official purposes, and Valhallans notoriously cultivated non-Earthlike customs because they were a very insecure colonial culture in search of its own identity. It would be necessary to have a thorough cultural survey run . . .

A tap on his shoulder. Cornelius: "Master Brand, we have an urgent message from the Department of Pan-Human Affairs. The effect of this continual detainment of the Valhallan representative aboard the *Fulmar* could be to undo a century's work towards a rapprochement of our two planets."

Brand half-turned his head. "Tell them to go contemplate the infinite. There are eight hundred

million Valhallans, and only one Tantalan."

The traveloguer, Tanya Hesit, had made a life's career of low-grade sensationalism. She was a borderline psychotic, obviously—it took an unbalanced mind to view the universe through her particular kind of distorting mirror. Reports showed that her sexuality was especially disturbed, bearing type-traces of narcissism and lack of normal affect. In other words she was mildly nymphomaniac because she was looking for a permanent emotional union she did not know how to attain.

Once more, an interruption—Cornelius again, announcing that a man called Pigoyan from Sensi-service, who had come to meet Tanya Hesit and begin work on her contracted travelogue, was threatening suit for everything he could think of including *habeas corpus*, malicious persecution and violation of the Charter of Pan-Human Rights. Cornelius sounded anxious.

"Send him a transcript of the brief accorded to the Powers of Earth," Brand grunted. "If he wants to have that changed, it'll take him through the next legislative session—and this will have to be settled before then!"

THERE was the scientist, Relly. Brand's eyes were beginning to sting, and he rubbed

them absently. Honestly, if the Tantalan had waited a century for a better bunch of eccentrics among whom to hide it couldn't have made a superior choice. Relly wasn't just a man playing at science; he was a highly original researcher in one of the most advanced modern disciplines the one known formally as polytopology and nicknamed mathemadness. Relly would presumably have more in common, mentally, with a megabrain computer than any of the other passengers on the ship; he would be accustomed to a world in which he spoke more to machines than to other people. Scientific specialties had become islands of thought which only computer-controlled networks could link together. Hence Relly would be a borderline schizophrenic, capable of communicating at the level of light conversation or else in the deep-down jargon of his own associates—nothing between.

Yet another interruption, from his remembrancer now; Cornelius was away pacifying Pigoyan. "Sir, we're advised that computer capacity totalling four megabrainis is being kept idle until Relly gets off that ship. It was held for him at his special request, and it's costing his hosts, the Foundation of Advanced Mathematics, half a billion a day."

"Splendid. I didn't think that

much spare capacity could be made available in under a week. Requisition it—I'm going to need all of it, and probably more."

"They won't be very happy," the girl said. She was getting less timid in her manner of address.

"They don't have to *like* it. They just have to *do* it."

There was Beloved Sister Dorcas, a Circle missionary from Bethel. Not much to be said about her, of course. Anyone who believed that Jesus Christ was a time-traveller and that the sole purpose of human history was to facilitate his departure into the past as soon as possible was patiently precessing with all gyros, and someone who went around trying to persuade others that this idea was important was all of the foregoing, squared.

"Master Brand!" Shofee, this time; Cornelius wasn't back and the remembrancer was out pacifying the Foundation of Advanced Mathematics. "A highly influential group of Circle Believers is alleging religious persecution and will be given all the necessary facilities for blowing up a scandal—this man Pigoyan has offered them—unless their missionary is allowed to land at once."

"Have the Communications Authority review their license to proselytize. They've been exceeding their rights for a good five years, and by the time they've

finished explaining that they can probably have their missionary and welcome."

Another nut case. Brand was beginning to recall the Dark Age saying about everyone being a little touched bar thee and me. This time, Hazel Graubart, who had taken herself off Earth to Sequoia, the furthest planet from Earth accepting colonists at the time, in a fit of pique, and had promptly tried to buy herself out of contract. It had taken her ten years, because she refused to do any work constructive enough to advance the colony—which she said was a criminal undertaking not for her to abet—and had consequently been paid minimal rates. She was a blot on Sequoia's impeccable record; that was the least troublesome of all the out-worlds.

So long as she was fit to do any work at all Sequoia had been unwilling to waste her in therapy. On prosperous Earth, where only one person in ten had to do real work, she would probably wind up in hospital under treatment for persecution mania within a few weeks.

FINALLY, relief—at first glance. Someone comparatively normal: a communications engineer named Waters, who had been working on the Valhallan main subradio installation. His professional record was fine.

Just a moment: why was he returning ahead of contract time? Brand's forehead, briefly smooth, folded back into a frown. The answer came up promptly. A racialist. A redhead man who had got hold of the ancient speculation that red hair was a Neanderthal inheritance, and who felt in consequence much as did that character in the old diatonic operetta who could trace his ancestry back to a primordial protoplasmic globule and was therefore born sneering. Valhallans were mostly of Lappish stock, with some Siberian Eskimo and Mongolian; they were on the short side, and stocky. And Waters had expressed his racialist opinions once too often.

"There's only one chance for us," Brand said with a cynicism not entirely feigned. "We'll just have to hope that this creature on Tantalus has its own problems."

"What?" His remembrance looked at him, startled.

"Nothing . . . Hasn't Locations found me any of Voidech's staff yet?"

"I'm holding contacts with four of them," the girl said.

"Good. I have some questions I want to put to them before I get in touch with Veliz at Project Tantalus."

The girl hesitated. Then, greatly daring, she said, "May I ask if something is wrong? You seem upset."

"I am," Brand admitted. "I was assuming we would detect the alleged non-human passenger quite simply, because he, or she, would somehow behave in a peculiar manner. That ship is a dear, and there isn't anyone aboard you'd expect to make like a normal person. And with everybody from Sensiservice to a bunch of Circle Believers barking at my heels, I'm starting to wonder whether I know what a normal person would look like if I saw one."

(To be concluded next month)

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URNED REPRIEVE

A little physics can sometimes go a long way . . . especially under pressure!

BY ARTHUR PORGES

Illustrated by ADRAGNA

SURE death, known to be on the way, and in no very pleasant form, can never be easy to face. Even an elderly stoic, looking back on a full life, might feel himself mistreated. At nineteen, such a prospect seems a shattering injustice on the part of the universe.

Will De Ruyter—reputedly a direct descendant of the legendary Dutch admiral who had trounced the British six hundred years earlier—was one month past his nineteenth birthday, and would be dead in twenty-four hours. He would die amid an alien people, hundreds of light-years from earth. He was no coward; an Ensign-Cadet on an interstellar scout is seldom that; but it did seem a useless and unnecessary finish, especially with so much to see and learn.

On the other hand, he should have been dead days before, along with the rest of the crew. Except for the circumstance of his being a few hundred feet away from

the ship, although in plain sight of the Watch Officer, as regulations required, when the catastrophe occurred, he too would be a radioactive corpse now.

It had undoubtedly been one of those rare accidents, almost unheard of in modern times. There was a flash of intolerably blue light, a hissing roar, and the great starship literally dissolved into a pool of shimmering slag. Even as De Ruyter had run from the scene, he had believed himself dead; surely the burst of neutrons had smashed most of his vital cells to rubble. And yet, perhaps because of the thick, misty air, he had been only mildly ill. Or maybe the radiation had been directed at a higher angle, shooting over his head because of the slight dip in which he stood.

In any case, that didn't matter, because a few hours after, the prowling Nardim braves had taken him, and now he would die a little later; that was the only gain.

As an Ensign-Cadet, he had only a minor role on board the ship, but like any ambitious junior, De Ruyter seized every chance to advance himself professionally. According to the usual procedure, the ship had stayed clear of the planet and its two moons, monitoring the language of the Nardim civilization, and preparing a tentative plan

for contacting the natives. De Ruyter was one of the first to master the rudiments of the Nardim tongue; as to the civilization itself, about all they learned was that it had developed on the ruins of a much higher one. The Nardim people were quite primitive, roughly on the level, it would seem, of the Red Indian tribes of earth's infancy.



As he sat in front of the Death Hut, De Ruyter felt the tug of conflicting emotions. By rights he should hate these savages; and yet he found them quite likeable. They were not cruel, nor blood-thirsty; they seemed to approve of him, even, although he was a puny specimen by their standards. They would have resembled gorillas, so heavily muscled were both sexes, except that their bodies were not only completely free of hair, but as white and smooth as porcelain.

If they meant to kill him, there was no malice in the act. Gilgo, their god, who lived in the heavens with his mate, Ilkora, had to be appeased. Any alien was an offense to him, automatically and regardless of other circumstances. It was not enough for such a one to accept the god; Gilgo must accept him; and that was a rare occurrence, indeed.

Twice a year Gilgo became particularly furious, swallowing Ilkora completely. It was De Ruyter's bad luck that tonight was the night. Otherwise, the tribe would have held him six more months, unharmed, and a rescue ship would come on time.

He had explained to the chief that his people would exact a terrible vengeance on the tribe—which was not true, since interplanetary law frowned on reprisals against primitives—but the elder, calmly and without

malice had said: "Even if all my people die, Gilgo must be served; we have no choice; it has always been that way."

De Ruyter looked at him in wonder. You had to respect him; he was ignorant and stubborn; but not opportunistic, at least. He was ready to die for a principle; how many more advanced peoples could say the same?

"Why must I die, since I'm no enemy of you or your god? I came in peace," the boy said. He hoped that his voice, made absurdly high-pitched by the thirty-three pounds per square inch air pressure of the planet, would not imply femininity or weakness. It was annoying not to have the use of his normal deep baritone, but fortunately if the air was heavy, it had a little less oxygen, and didn't affect his metabolism. With a squeaky voice and a racing heart, he might easily give them the wrong impression; and, oddly enough, doomed or not, he wanted their respect, and so far had it.

But later tonight they would quietly, without hate, knock him on the head, cut his throat, and with a funnel pour his blood into the big metal urn in the Death Hut behind him. Like all the metal objects in the country, it had been made by a vanished civilization; these people were incapable of duplicating such work:

He wondered vaguely about the

lost people; no doubt, as so often happened, they had emerged painfully from savagery to technological heights only to destroy themselves with weapons nobody could control. And now the Nardim primitives used their artifacts in weird and wonderful ways.

But the larger moon had eclipsed the smaller: Gilgo had, in fact, swallowed his wife, Il-kora. It was time for fertility rites and then the sacrifice of the alien.

De Ruyter, who had been well fed and tenderly cared for, was now permitted to watch the elaborate rituals by which adolescent boys and girls became officially members of the adult tribe. The scene was not as revolting as he had feared; many of the dances were charming, although the women, with their bulging muscles and ceramic-like skins, had no appeal for a human.

THE old chief, Largini, sitting beside De Ruyter outside the Death Hut, pointed to the sky.

"Soon Gilgo will spit out his mate; he not so angry then. After that," he added regretfully, "we come for you. There is plenty good food inside; nice fire. You drink lots of misca; that way not afraid. We not hurt you much."

"I'm not afraid to die," De Ruyter said stiffly, trying without success to deepen his voice; "But

it's so stupid and useless. I was never your enemy."

The chief's face hardened.

"It is not stupid," he said coldly. "We do not hate you, either. It is just the way things must be done. I did not make this world," he added, in an oddly melancholy tone, and the boy looked at him in surprise. The plaint was a familiar one, and had been so on earth for millennia. He felt a sudden surge of liking for the old chief.

At that moment there was shrill, ululating cry, so intense and unexpected that De Ruyter started.

"What's that?" he demanded.

A huge native was cavorting amid the ritual fires, each with its sacrificial urn beside it. His eyes shone whitely in the flickering light; foam oozed from the corners of his mouth. He gave the uncanny shriek again, leaping high into the air.

"The god has taken possession of him," Largini said tensely. "He is the first in two years."

"You mean that Gilgo is controlling him now?"

"Maybe; there is still the test—the proof. Ah, it comes now. If this is a false possession, Daltorm will die like you."

"What's the proof—" De Ruyter began, but the chief waved him to silence. The frothing buck soared over a larger fire, and seized a metal bar. He raised it

high above his head, and with a mighty writhe of arms and shoulders, bent the inch-thick rod like so much rubber.

"A good start," Largini approved, "but no proof yet. Some of my people," he added complacently, "can do that without the help of Gilgo."

The buck screamed again, and ran to one of the urns. Like all the others, it was five feet tall, narrow necked, full in the center, and had a circular base a foot in radius. It was made of some coppery alloy, De Ruyter suspected, although he had not been able to verify the hunch. But he knew that the urn was about a quarter of an inch thick as to gauge, and that the metal was tempered.

The frenzied native clasped the urn about the center, shrieked once more, and hugged the thing like a great bear. De Ruyter could see the huge muscles of his arms and torso knotting with effort. He held the strained pose for perhaps ten seconds, and then stumbled back, gasping, the wild light gone from his eyes. There was a slight but unmistakable dent in the urn, and Largini grunted in approval.

"Gilgo was in him; no ordinary one can cave in a sacrificial urn. Daltorm will be greatly honored all year."

FOR a moment De Ruyter felt searing contempt. So this hys-

teria, the same kind of thing that made a frail earth woman able to lift a two-ton vehicle off her baby, was the stigma of a god! Then he pitied the primitives; after all, his own people had passed through the same stage eons ago. He eyed the big buck, and thrilled to a sudden idea.

"What if I overcame Daltorm in battle?" he said eagerly. "Wouldn't that mean I too was accepted by the god?"

The old chief gave him a solemn stare.

"No," he said briefly. "Battle proves nothing. You may have tricks or weapons to kill many of us. That proves nothing about Gilgo. Besides," he added, with more natural pride, "I have no doubt that bare-handed he could kill you easily. But he would not, nor would any of us, except to save his life. We kill only for Gilgo."

De Ruyter groaned. He'd be better off with a more blood-thirsty people, like the old Red Indians. With his Academy training in judo and karate, he could certainly toss that big buck on his ear; and yet these strangely peaceable savages wouldn't even give him the chance. Calmly and dispassionately, with all the mercy permissible in the circumstances, they were going to slit his throat instead! Why the devil weren't they civilized all the way, and not just two-thirds or three-

fourths. Except for that Gilgo nonsense, they were decent folk, no doubt of that.

The chief stood up, motioning to the hut.

"Go inside," he ordered De Ruyter. "Eat, drink plenty misca. In little while Gilgo spit out Il-kora; then we come for you."

Reluctantly the boy got up, looked at the starry sky. The constellations were strange, but stars are comforting symbols regardless. The old boy was right; plenty of misca, the fermented drink, might help; certainly the thought of food was depressing. He went in, and Largini closed the door behind him. The lock clicked, and a sentry took his post outside, too. Gilgo would be very angry if the prisoner got away. He might swallow not only his wife, but the whole tribe. Terrible is Gilgo when aroused.

Inside, De Ruyter crouched by the fire. It was a circular metal grill, piled high with glowing coals; the rocks under it also shone redly, as the ritual flames had burned here for generations, never once being allowed to die out.

Across the hut was a sacrificial urn, polished and glittering in the dancing firelight. A funnel hung on the wall beside it. Silly, the boy thought. They adapt a narrow-necked thing to be a holder of ritually shed blood, and need something as un-sacred—or so it

seemed to him—as a funnel, that most utilitarian of implements, more suggestive of a lab than a church. Or an illicit still.

Moodily, he poured a mug of misca from the big jug they had left him, and shoved the pot of food away. Sipping the fiery stuff, he inspected the urn. Amazing that even an hysterical buck could make a dent in the thing; pretty heavy gauge metal, and not soft, either. Like bronze. He wrapped an arm around it, then put the mug down, and tried both arms. He was strong and wiry, but there was not the slightest give in the metal. Gilgo certainly wasn't on his side.

He pulled out the stopper. It was brightly polished and smooth, fitting the narrow neck snugly. A neat job; the people who made it must have had an excellent technology.

He sat down by the fire again, and drank more misca. It had no effect. That was natural; given enough tension and underlying fear, and alcohol was impotent. Right now a gallon of eighty-proof whiskey would be like milk.

To take his mind off the immediate future, he studied the urn again. Big thing. Be a job to figure volume and surface. Given enough time, of course, and a stupid kind of persistence, one could do it the hard way: get approximate curves for the sides,

and then set up surface and volume integrals. Might be distracting to make intelligent estimates. Surface, for example. Base, circular; radius a foot, near enough. If you pushed in the bulging middle, and allowed for the neck, the thing would approximate a cylinder of radius one foot, and height close to five feet; open at the top, or else shorter. Let's say open. He made a mental calculation. Such a cylinder would have a surface, counting the base, of about thirty square feet, or 4300 square inches. Why not square millimeters? he asked himself ironically; or yards? Why not—he broke off that line of thought, open mouthed, staring at the urn with blank eyes. A vision from the past came to him; a scene in his high school physics lab. Would it work? It had to; in fact, this was an ideal planet for it.

HE jumped to his feet, stepped over to the urn, and wrestled the heavy thing to the fire. He set the base squarely on the glowing coals. Water—he had to have water. None in the hut. Misca—that would do; luckily they'd left him a huge jug of the liquor. Quickly he emptied it into the narrow neck of the urn. There should be enough to cover the bottom an inch deep; he hoped that was enough; it didn't take much to do the trick, as he recalled; but

the details were hazy, thanks perhaps to the alcohol, now beginning to affect him.

It was a question of time; if only Gilgo kept his spouse down a few minutes more! De Ruyter hoped, muzzily, that the god had a strong stomach and felt no queasiness. He didn't feel that well himself.

Outside, the sentry coughed, and De Ruyter guessed, from a growing murmur, that the tribe was gathering to witness his immolation very soon. Standing in the flames, the urn muttered to itself. The oil-impregnated mineral that supported the fire was better than the best coal; it gave out immense quantities of heat, and seemed to last forever. On the other hand, liquid couldn't boil easily against the heavy pressure of air. Just another five minutes, the boy prayed silently; that's all I need—five little minutes alone here, then shoot the works.

The coppery metal was a good conductor of heat; a wisp of steam drifted out of the urn's narrow neck. Stopper in hand, De Ruyter watched with painful intensity. Soon the wisp became a wavering plume, and then a squirming jet. Finally the jet stiffened, and the urn began to rumble ominously. This was it.

He reached forward with the stopper, and rammed it into the opening. Instantly it popped out,

flying up to the ceiling, which it struck with a thump. Fool! De Ruyter told himself—what did you expect. Wrong order of procedure.

He hastily put on his uniform jacket. The upper part of the urn, while not extremely hot, was sure to be hard on bare skin, and he couldn't afford to drop the thing because of pain.

Tugging at the cooler neck, he muscled the urn off the fire, setting its base on the damp, cool earth of the hut's floor. He studied it for several seconds, and when the steam jet at the mouth weakened, inserted the stopper, hammering it down with his fist. It was an ideal plug for this kind of operation; since the harder it was pushed, the better it fitted.

The muttering was dying away; it wouldn't be long now before the steam inside condensed. When that happened, the outside pressure of the air would be thirty-three pounds per square inch on each and every one of the forty-three hundred square inches of the urn's surface. That was roughly—he gulped—seventy tons. The biggest buck on this planet couldn't hope to match that.

The urn creaked a warning. It was time to get some witnesses, fast. In his new, shrill voice De Ruyter gave a wavering cry in imitation of the hysterical buck. The sentry flung open the door

and charged in, followed by the chief and several elders. They saw the prisoner, eyes glaring madly, hugging the urn.

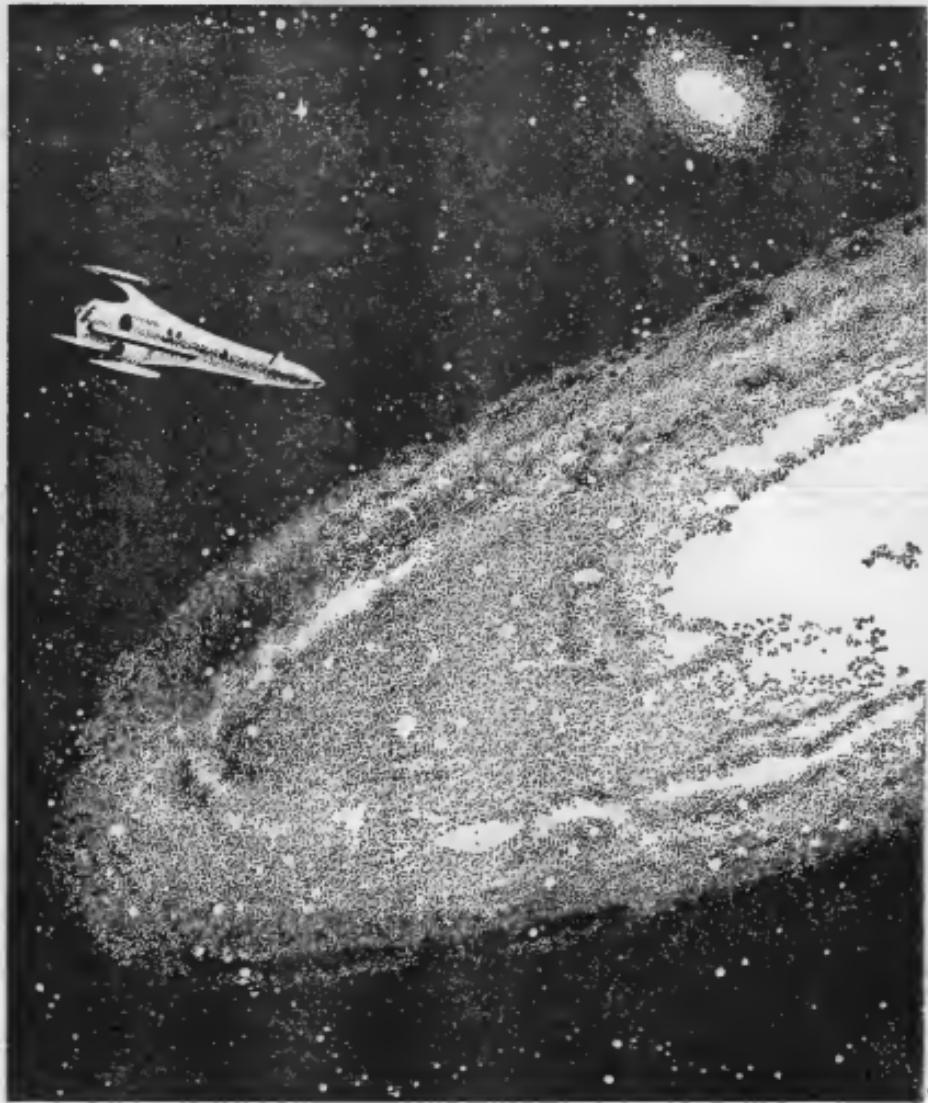
Old Largini gaped in amazement. It was incredible, such strength, but he had to believe his eyes. The whole urn was buckling under the hug of this slender youth. With a popping sound, one side caved in completely, and it didn't seem that the boy was even pressing on that part.

De Ruyter released the urn, stepped back, and assumed a more normal expression. He quickly changed it to one of bewilderment, and mumbled: "What happened? What have I been doing? It felt as if a great power suddenly entered into me, taking complete control . . ."

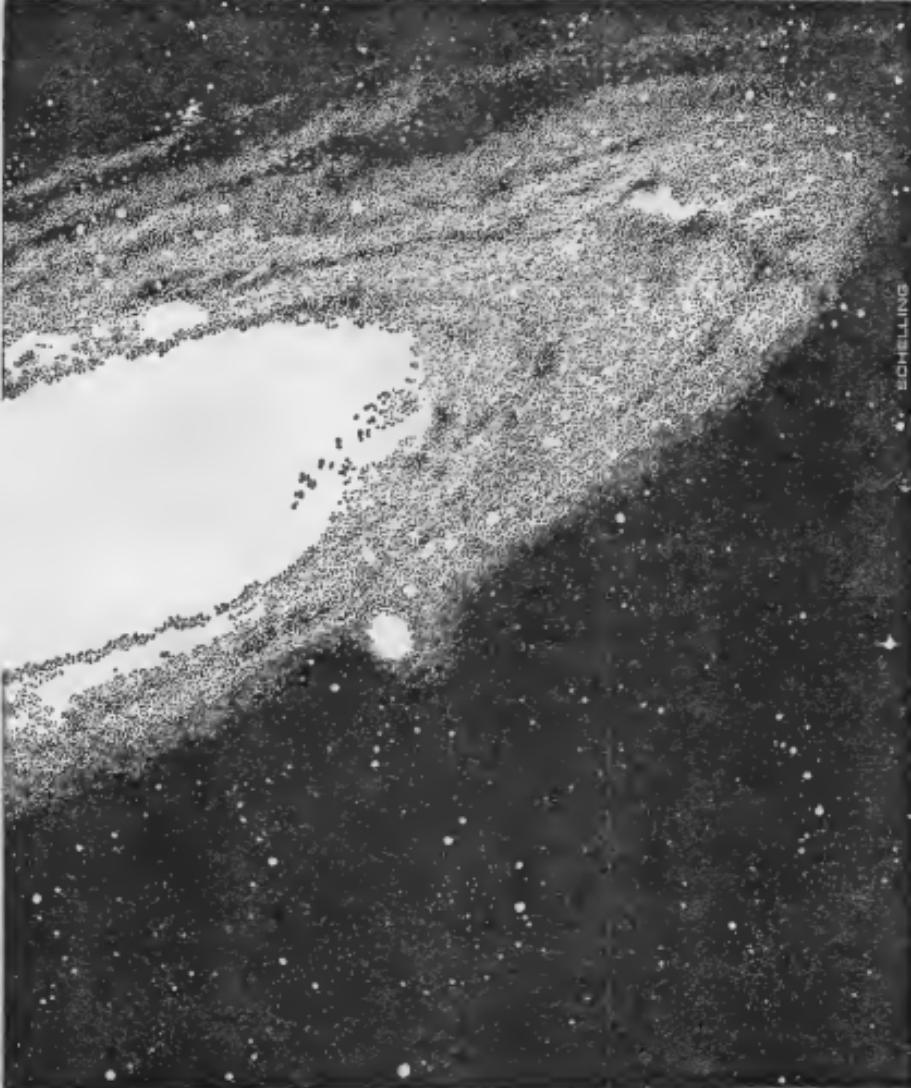
"It is a miracle," the chief said. "Gilgo has entered the alien; has accepted him. Such a thing has never happened before." He put his hands on the boy's shoulders. "You will not be killed. The god has saved you. You are to be our honored guest until your people come for you. Tell me, what god do you worship, boy? He must have pled with Gilgo."

"Right now," De Ruyter said fervently, "Pascal, Torricelli, Galileo . . . or whoever fiddled with air-pressure . . . I can't re . . . mem . . . ber . . ." He sagged, out cold.

"Strange and wonderful name," Largini said. "A mighty god."



in the shadow



SCHELLING

of the worm

By NEAL BARRETT, JR.

Illustrated by SCHELLING

The Beautiful Lady . . . the Android who does but may not love her . . . the Mad Villain . . . the Unutterable Menace . . . These are stock (almost laughing-stock) figures of science fiction. Now Neal Barrett (last in these pages with "To Plant A Seed") takes them and makes them vibrant with suspense, with poetry, with meaning. Follow, now, the Lady Larrehne and Steifen non-man as they grapple with ultimate good and evil.

A PIECE of space cracks high and sharp—*ping-ping!*—like glass blown to powder frost, and the ship blinks into cold brightness.

We are far from home—as far as far could be. The Great Lens is a blind-white eye, our ship a cobalt tear.

Emptiness. And a blue tear. But we are not alone. A fun-bubble drifts nearby—three dark Sheegai cease a fornication of great complexity, turn, and stare. I can sense their no-shapes, inside-out, like solid gloves, and imagine their great yellow eyes. . . .

Few are the ships they see out here, and surely none like ours—proud, sleek and graceful—a wolf that turned into a bird! Oh, fear-

some and great she is! A league and a half of terror and love from silver beak to spiked bronze tail—a'shimmer with golden scales from steel-ruffle neck to dragon wings; and each bright horny shield as wide as fifty humans high.

It is a sight for even the Sheegai to record in gray-brittle memories. . . .

The ship is named *Gryphon*, and I stand alone in her cavernous skull, close my eyes and feel the great bird's surging power. My senses reach out, and I know her diamond-bright perfection, hear the clean, pure hum of sub-molecular song. All is well. There remains the one matter . . .

The ship is intelligent, certain-

ly—in her own way. More so than I in many respects. I am not too good at simultaneous multiples, but *she* has noted a billion different things since emergence—*chatter! chatter! chatter!* She tells me the presence of the Sheegai bubble is reasonable, considering where we are—and I agree.

But while I am not a man, I have the near-duplicate aspects, and I wish to see such things for myself. Drifting to the starboard eye, I find the tiny dot against the black. I nod at it—as a real man might easily do—then turn, and quickly drop down the *Gryphon's* velvet throat . . .

I

LADY Larrehne waited in the maw of the great closed beak. She stood quite still; dark lashes curtained over violet eyes, golden legs straight, arms gently folded—a flower of cool evening, waiting for moonlight to bloom.

Standing there in velvet light—light that breathed as she breathed—her beauty seemed a fragile thing. But she was not fragile at all . . . The smooth angle of high cheeks swept down to lips of pliant warmth and fullness; but the fullness could fade to thin, taut determination in the flick of an eye.

Still, Larrehne of Mourlin was not perfect—perfection is fleet-

ing. There were flaws in her character, face and figure, and the result was the unmatchable Larrehne: exquisite imperfection. No one who saw her remembered everything about her—and yet none forgot what they had seen . . .

Steifen the non-man was no exception—but non-men have a way of concealing those emotions they were never really meant to have. His eyes never wavered as he drifted from the throat of the *Gryphon* to stand before her. He merely lowered his head respectfully, and let the perfume of a thousand dreams wash over his senses.

"All is secure, Lady . . ."

Dark lashes rose slightly, still veiling violet eyes.

"Good, Steifen. I thank you." Then the lashes opened fully, and deep eyes warmed the non-man's chromium soul.

"It is there, isn't it?" she asked anxiously. "You've seen it?"

"No, Lady. I didn't look from Control. I came directly to you. But it is there."

She smiled, sighed gently. "Well, this is what we came for, old friend. I suppose there's no reason to put it off, is there?"

She stepped toward him, and the live Silkit robe gathered itself firmly about her.

Steifen did not move. She

turned, let her eyes hold him a long moment, then stretched slim fingers to meet his own.

"Come. Please . . ." Her voice was a gentle whisper, warming him like summer twilight.

"Steifen, whatever is here, *you're* with me. I'm not afraid." Her fingers tightened over his. He met her eyes, and could do nothing but stand aside and let her walk beside him . . .

II

SIDE by side, they glided down the dark curve of the *Gryphon's* beak. The silver stream beneath them came alive to sniff the way; cresting in brightness ahead, dying in sparkle motes behind. Blue and white glowballs fluttered down to dart and skirr around their heads like restless halos.

The silver path hissed against ancient wood, faded, frothed to gray foam. Steifen's hand touched the hard, polished surface, felt the familiar, gem-studied pattern beneath his fingers.

He hesitated, glancing quickly at Larrehne. She was very still beside him, peering into darkness.

He paused a second more, then pressed fire-yellow and sea-green circles to life.

The great upper beak of the *Gryphon* moved, hummed back upon itself 300 silent feet above.

Larrehne of Mourlin and Steifen non-man, mites in the domed tip of the giant's tongue, watched the planet's glare flood in upon them.

Larrehne gasped, wide, dark eyes bright in the green glow.

"I'm not sure—what I expected, but—it is very beautiful, is it not?"

Steifen shrugged. "From here, yes, Lady. This is a world that gains beauty as one retreats from it. I think it would be lovelier still from the other side of the Great Lens."

Larrehne's coral lips formed a wide O of mock astonishment.

"Why, Steifen!" She turned, touching his chin and bringing him around to face her.

"My, we're having a cynical turn, aren't we?" She laughed. Bright, silver bells. "This is a new facet of your personality, old friend—I find you ever full of surprises!"

Steifen permitted the thin ghost of a smile. "I was programmed full of surprises, Lady—your father didn't build a frog to converse with his swan."

Larrehne glanced up. Her head turned pertly, and she looked at him as if she were truly seeing him for the first time.

"Sometimes, Steifen," she said thoughtfully, a finger to her cheek, "I wonder if you haven't simply discarded your program in favor of one that suits you

better. Honestly—the things you say!"

Steifen cleared his throat. "Of course, Lady, initial programming is only the first step toward creative fulfilment of a—"

Larrehne laughed, spreading her hands in surrender. "All right—I give up! When *you* start quoting non-man scripture . . . come on, I'm hungry, and I *don't* think I'll feel much like eating later." She nodded toward the swollen world above. "And I *would* like a glass of that Felizian rose and perhaps something from the sandwich tree—and do stop pouting—I *like* you the way you are!"

A QUICK selection, and luncheon sighed into place. Steifen dimmed the baleful light of the too-bright world, and glowballs clustered softly over the small round table.

Larrehne took quick, delicate bites, followed by sips of cloud-pink wine. Her face was bright with pleasure.

Steifen raised his own glass, holding it so the dim planet floated redly beneath the surface. "Truly," he said, "the wines of Feliz are unmatched, and I'm eternally grateful My Lady holds a sound block of shares in so worthy a world."

She laughed, but watched him with knowing eyes. "I did not meet Steifen non-man yester-

day," she said casually, measuring the long stem of her glass, "nor the day before that. And when he speaks of wine, you can be sure he is *thinking* of something quite different. So. Steifen non-man, what are you thinking about?"

Steifen flinched. "My soul is open to your ever-watchful eye. What chance has a poor bundle of tubes and pipes against brains and beauty? I was not exactly thinking, Lady—it was more like idle speculation of the 'what if' variety. I was wondering what kind of a galaxy it would be if more worlds followed in the path of Feliz."

"I fear," she grinned, "it would be a rather blurry galaxy."

"No," said Steifen, "not *all* of them growing grapes—Heaven forbid. But it is *honest* work, isn't it? —And I was comparing that world's industry—with this one's." He pointed his glass at the pale circle of light above.

Larrehne looked down. "Oh . . . I see."

"A moment ago you accused me of taking a cynical turn, Lady," he said. "There, if you will, is truly a world for the cynic to contemplate, be he real or non-man. Ouriee, when it was not this, but a world of the Sheegai, and later, simply Outpost, when Man took it from them. And since—Carnis and Bouchier, and Abbattoir . . ."

Larrehne sighed. "So that's what's bothering you. . . . I certainly should have known. Steifen, Steifen—I *know*, and I like this dream of—of honest worlds. But," she peered at him closely, "I *know you*, too; and I know what is behind such thoughts. They have been there since we began this, and before."

She leaned across the table and covered his hand with hers.

"Steifen, your Lady is neither a butterfly wing or a flower petal. I *won't* shrivel and wilt from gazing on—that . . ."

"No. No," he said firmly, "you will not, Lady. . . ."

III

LARREHNE stood. A quick wave of her hand, and the luncheon table sighed in upon itself, disappeared.

Steifen rose to stand silently beside her.

"I *know* what to expect," she said suddenly, sensing his mood, "I've seen the end of this. I can surely stand the beginning, Steifen."

There was a fine hint of firmness in her voice. Still the non-man did not move. Instead, he studied the tiny pulse in the pearl column of her neck. He knew. He had known for a long time that this moment would come; and when it did, that he would disobey her.

It was a peculiar feeling—and most unwelcome. Certain nodes sent uncomfortable shocks through his system.

A glowball drifted by her shoulder, warming white flesh. She smiled at him in the quick light, and at once he felt shame. He clenched his fists and stepped back from the railing—he could not stop her, but this time he could not cause her pain, either.

Then, the thought: To initiate an act that would bring her displeasure, wasn't that better than letting her bring displeasure on herself? The answer didn't click readily into place as it should have, and he knew what was wrong—he was wandering in the ever confusing corridors of real-man philosophy. If *they* can't answer it, he asked himself wearily, what is such a thing doing in my head?

Larrehne of Mourlin was blessed with understanding. Moving quietly past him, she studied the gem patterns in dark wood. She moved as if simple curiosity instead of necessity brought her to pushbutton jobs that were his.

Her fingers drifted over softly burning jewels, settled, and pale blue opals winked and died. She looked up slowly, and at once her body trembled and stiffened against the rail . . .

Steifen followed her gaze as the dome flickered, blurred; and

the planet rushed in until it covered all but a shard of space. He glanced away, quickly, at Larrehne, and swallowed hard. His fingers tightened around the rail.

His Lady felt pain. He knew it and could not act to stop it—not against her will. The muscles in her face contorted and her body trembled, but her eyes remained locked on the terrible, swollen globe that was hanging in black space . . .

Steifen found it hard to pull his own gaze away. The constant, rhythmic motion of the planet's surface had a hypnotic effect—and he knew the movement, there was no trick of a hazy atmosphere. Not this time. Whatever moved on that world was awesomely real . . .

First, pinpoint smudges of gray, evenly-spaced over the vast, swimming surface, each point ringed with a writhing, darker circle whose rim touched other rims circling other points—and swarming from those dark rims, the great wombs of the planet, the terrible blind herds stumbling toward death before birth could register on feeble brains. Then: *Snap! Jerk!* into the FTL auras gleaming a thousand miles above the surface.

It was over quickly, and he knew those near-mindless things never felt the wrench of gravitic death. Still, knowing and feeling

are different—oh, so different! A non-man is acutely aware of this, and Steifen could not repress a shudder, or shut out the vision of things muscle-blue, fat-yellow and hideless speeding through frozen space. . . .

Blink! Blink! Blink!
One per second through the aura,
. . . Out the big dark hole—
Moo-moo, Baa-baa, piggie lad;
Where did you leave your soul?

Larrehne gave a little cry that twisted Steifen's heart. He stabbed out savagely and hurled the bright image into comforting distance. The galaxy's slaughterhouse rolled back through space until it was only a gray-pink puffball spiked with delicate filaments of white.

Steifen felt her touch, a small hand pressing gratefully against his own—and at the same time the breath of her thoughts brushed him like the cold whisper of winter . . .

"Oh, Steifen, Steifen, maybe I am that butterfly wing—but don't let me be crushed just yet—not yet, Steifen! . . ."

IV

THE Balimann was tall, spare, hard-rubber muscled. His long face was fine-chiseled, high-

polished, bleached and tanned until his color seemed to reach out and glow a good inch above the skin.

He threw back his iron-gray mane when he laughed, and his spike beard cut notches in the air. He shook his head and wiped his eyes with a ruffled sleeve.

Larrehne watched him curiously. The Balimann warded her off with a palm raised in peace. But it is marvelous, you know! Garahnell will be simply furious!"

Larrehne shook her head firmly. "Now you are putting words in my mouth, and I meant no courtesy to Garahnell. I have business with him—as I have with you. I chose to stay on Balimann's Moon because I will not set my ship down on Slaughterhouse. Never. When we have finished here, Garahnell can come and join us, and—that amuses you, Balimann?"

His grin had widened as she spoke. Now he shrugged easily. "Oh, I wasn't laughing at *you*, Lady. Of course you couldn't know, but—Garahnell, come here? Never in a million years!"

"And why not?" she asked tightly.

Balimann looked at her steadily, then lowered his eyes with a slight bow. "That is for Garahnell to tell you, Lady—if he so wishes."

It was Larrehne's turn to

shrug. "As you say, of course. It is certainly none of my business."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean it to come out quite that way. I—" Suddenly his hand jerked to his head as if he had remembered something important.

"Ah, Lady, I am *much* too isolated here! Forgive me. I have committed the worst sin of all—tempting a woman with a secret then announcing that I cannot tell it to her! Hah! Balimann the Bumkin!"

Larrehne laughed. "You are forgiven, Balimann. And, it was not a woman's prying, really. I merely thought that you and Lord Garahnell, under the circumstances . . ."

Balimann nodded. "That I can answer, Lady. Garahnell and I are rather dependent upon each other for whatever companionship we require; and fortunately, both our requirements are small—what I mean to say is that we value each other's absence so highly that a strong bond exists between us." Balimann smiled. "So Lord Garahnell keeps to his pesthole—and I to mine."

Larrehne glanced about the room. "My, it seems a warm and friendly pesthole to me, Balimann."

"Because, for some happy reason, Lady, you have chosen to bring a bright candle into this dark place . . ."

Larrehne read the question on his lips. She ignored it, stood, and walked to the high port that looked from The Balimann's study onto the great night. Steifen stood in the shadows there, and she followed his gaze upward where the *Gryphon* hung like a brass and silver moon. She smiled at the non-man, and Steifen understood. She turned and faced Balimann.

"I'm sure you must already know why I have come here."

The dark head lifted slowly, then bowed solemnly. "I feared it was not the charm of Balimann himself that brought you to the ice-thin edge of the galaxy." He sighed. "I'm afraid I am still The Balimann, then—keeper of Andromeda's ugly child. You come, Lady, to see The Worm. This I know . . ."

Larrehne laughed. "I would never say this Wormkeeper lacks charm—but I fear life on this lonely moon has turned him into a very bad poet."

Balimann grinned and refilled her glass with dark wine. "Perhaps," he said slyly, "but I am also the best poet on Balimann's Moon—am I not?" He spread his hands in bewilderment. "I ask you, Lady—what other weapon have I—but the evasion of poetry? I cling like a flea to the rim of the Big Wheel—but I am still a *man*! I will spout poems until I am blue in the face if I believe

there is a small chance of changing your mind. How, I ask you, can I hope to win the fair Larrehne after I have shown her the Great Horror, the Eater of Worlds, the—"

"Oh, stop it!" Larrehne laughed. "I've heard all the scary stories in my cradle, Balimann. Now I am a woman, and I wish to see this—World Eater for myself."

Balimann was silent a long moment. He stood, finally, his hands braced on the table between them. His eyes were dark and somber now, burning like black suns into her own.

"Then I have done what I can to dissuade you?" he said. Larrehne was shocked by the change in his voice. She stared up at him, saying nothing.

"Yes," he said finally, "I see that I have. Then of course you shall see the thing, Lady. I cannot deny you."

He stood, extending his arm. "Now, Lady, it is late, and I suggest you rest from your journey. We're somewhat isolated here, but I think you'll find most of the comforts. And tomorrow," he added grimly, "I believe you will most assuredly need your strength."

Larrehne did not rise. She watched him curiously. "I'm not tired, Balimann, really. Is there some reason, some preparations you must make—"

Balimann sighed. "You want to know why I still evade, yes?" He shook his head, and Larrehne decided the wine had begun to show in the man's eyes, in the way the muscles moved at the corners of his mouth.

"No reason, Lady," he went on. "—at least, not for you. This is something I do for myself. Call it the small eccentricity of a host who is a stranger to his role. I cannot deny you—I said that—but one thing . ." He held up a finger. "When you leave, I would like to hear that you've enjoyed a restful night on Balimann's Moon." He spread his hands, smiling wearily. "And how could this be—if I let you see the Nightmare of Nightmares your very first night. . . . ?"

V

LARREHNE rose refreshed. Not even the memory of Slaughterhouse, or the gloomy promises of her host, disturbed her sleep. She found her Selfband and spent a peaceful hour before Steifen came to bathe and dress her for the day.

"You slept well, Lady?"

"Oh, yes, thank you, Steifen. And you?"

"Very comfortably, Lady."

It was always the same ritual, though the words varied slightly from day to day. They both knew Steifen had not slept since

the day of his creation; but it was an enjoyable way to begin the day.

It was, Steifen admitted, a beautiful day. Give The Balimann credit for that. Artificial, yes—but the 'sun' had risen with a dazzling display through the rose quartz walls of Lady Larrehne's bedroom.

He wondered, idly, whether such refinements were normal here, or whether 'sunrise' was reserved for their host's rare guests. Or, perhaps, contrived especially for this certain special guest?

He shrugged off the thought. It mattered not a whit, one way or the other; he was concerned with another matter, one not too far removed from The Balimann's flair for decoration.

Steifen sensed something unusual in the air, sensed it in a manner not readily explainable—for it was a sense he didn't share with real-men. It was on the order of a probability, based partially on the functioning of this unexplainable quality, and partly on common sense—a quality he *did* share with humanity.

The two senses told him there was an 84% probability that The Balimann had a method of observing Larrehne of Mourlin nude in her bath; and that there was a 97% probability that if he *did* have such a method—he was using it now.

Steifen was enraged at the thought, even though he knew his Lady would not lower herself to consider such vulgarity important—nor permit him to take action against it.

Still, he filed the thought away. At least, it helped evolve a more complete picture of the many-faceted personality of The Balimann.

He dried the Lady Larrehne with the softest towels, and applied oils and powders to her body. He dressed her in a young Silkit whose tiny brain must surely have cried out in sorrow as its own texture touched that incredible flesh.

Instantly, Steifen was flooded with shame. It had happened again, and after he had burned and destroyed the cells and circuits that carried the fearful thing to his brain. The deadly thoughts, then, had not been his barriers and come to plague him again . . .

Steifen non-man was programmed for unstinting loyalty to Lady Larrehne—all that he had was hers—every thought her own possession for the asking. He could not tell her that he was indeed imperfect. This one thing he knew he could never share with her, and the thought shattered the crystals of his mind:

While he condemned The Balimann, and all others that lusted after her, he, her non-man, ached

with that same longing. And what, he cried out, was more tragic than that? That a non-man be created with real-man emotions that could never in a million universes grow into reality?

VI

THE morning had hardly begun, and already, Steifen, with hate in his non-heart for The Balimann, and for himself, found himself hating still another!

It began normally enough, at breakfast, in The Balimann's ever-present psuedo-dawn. Again Steifen bowed to his host's taste. It was a green and dew-fresh garden; a sweet wind in the trees brought odors of a distant meadow, and it was easy to forget how achingly far, far, far this airless world lay from the meadows he remembered.

Even the Lady Larrehne was taken by the charm of this setting—and oh, The Balimann! All gloom of the night before had vanished, and he was again charm itself. His eyes shone like suns when his gaze fell upon Larrehne, and Steifen clenched his teeth and wondered if those eyes gleamed with the reflection of Larrehne of Mourlin clad in the light of a rose-quartz morning?

Then, the new man. It hap-

pened so quickly Steifen's weapon was in his hand and the trigger half-depressed before he understood.

No one noticed his mistake at all—every eye was on something stranger than that. It was only a projection, but real enough to bring a startled cry from Larrehne and a curse from Balimann. At once, Steifen knew he had met Lord Garahnell, Master of Slaughterhouse.

"Hah! Ahah!" The high-pitched voice matched the gaunt, spectral figure. A thin-lipped, red grin spread across a lean and nervous visage; a bony arm stretched out and a long finger uncurled in accusation.

Steifen looked about, wondering what great crime this stranger had discovered.

Garahnell loped toward them in great strides, his garish, archaic robes slurring across the marble beneath him. He stopped, suddenly, at the edge of the almost imperceptible glow that marked the limit of his projection, and his great cape dashed like foamy breakers across bony shoulders.

His fiery eyes rolled in a high circle, and rested on Larrehne, and for a quick moment Steifen saw, in shocked and painful familiarity, his own hunger mirrored.

Garahnell bowed low, sweeping a plumed hat from his head.

"Lady!" breathlessly, with gestures. "Let me say I am much relieved to find you safe and unharmed. Do not fear; even now my forces are mobilizing to effect your rescue!"

Steifen stared. What? What? A player's lines, memorized for the occasion? A sharper study, a deeper look into the eyes of this incredible man and he knew Lord Garahnell himself was not overly sure where the play ended and life began.

To what madhouse, Steifen wondered, have I brought My Lady!

Balimann, suddenly on his feet, knocking his chair over behind him, hands clenching like white claws, lips stretched across his teeth.

"Garahnell," said Balimann, his voice a velvet pouch full of tiny shards of glass, "you do me a courtesy coming here without invitation. I excuse you—and beg that you leave now, and present yourself to the Lady Larrehne of Mourlin at a more suitable time."

Garahnell made a mock bow, grinning widely. "Well said, Wormkeeper! Well said! And that suitable time would be—when *you* have finished with her? Eh? Eh? Hah!"

Larrehne paled. The Balimann was livid, trembling with rage. He glanced quickly at Steifen.

Steifen, though, was coldly

calm. He simply marked the man, and Garahnell spoke on borrowed time.

"Garahnell," hissed Balimann, "you—are—warned!" Steifen could see the shards, now, ripping through velvet.

Garahnell's brows lifted over dark eyes. "Warn? Warn, Worm-keeper? Say again *warn* when the air is sucked from the tunnels of that mudball of yours! Say again *warn* when Balimann's Moon is a dusty ring circling Slaughterhouse! Say—"

"Stop that, Lord Garahnell—instantly!" Larrehne's voice was brittle-blue ice.

Garahnell turned, his thin lips widening. "I offend, Lady?"

Larrehne shrugged. "I find you overly theatrical, Lord—and your remarks presumptuous. However, as you are here, let me say I wish to speak with you about an important matter. At your convenience."

Garahnell swirled his cape and showed white teeth. "Oh, speak we *will*, Lady! And soon!"

Again, the great cape swirled about scarecrow shoulders. "Do not resist me, Wormkeeper!" shrieked Garahnell. Balimann lunged forward, and the image faded as quickly as it had come.

Steifen stepped forward. "I must ask you, Lady, to accompany me at once to the *Gryphon*. I am at a loss to understand this man, but he is under the illusion

you are a prisoner here. Balimann, I'm sure my Lady would be most happy to have you join us. I think you'll find the *Gryphon* as impregnable as you find it amusing."

Balimann laughed shortly. "There's little need for impregnability, non-man! You misunderstand the Lord Garahnell."

Larrehne's eyes flashed hotly. "Then I, too, misunderstand him, Balimann! He is either insane—or a fool!"

Balimann shook his head. "He is not the most likeable of men, Lady—but I know him—and he means no harm. Please. Will you come?" He moved a few steps from the table.

Larrehne stood, watching him with silent eyes. She placed her hand tightly in Steifen's and followed the Wormkeeper's steps.

VII

THE *Gryphon* shimmered in eternal night beyond the great window. Balimann pointed. Nothing.

Then: "Wait—ah, there!"

Larrehne strained forward, but a man's eyes are sharper than a woman's, and a non-man's sharper still. The hackles of his pseudo-hair began a long climb up along the length of Steifen's neck . . .

Like Garahnell himself, it was a parody. From the right, a fleet

of one-man ships in perfect vee. They approached, broke clumsily, and formed a ragged, hovering ring around Balimann's Moon.

Grinning, Balimann flipped a long finger and the ships seemed touching close.

But even before, Steifen knew—he sensed them. He knew they were present, because it could be nothing else. *Sheegai!* His non-blood boiled. The Sheegai, condemned forever to the far rim and beyond, without even a planet of their own—this their punishment for that great and awesome crime against Man so long ago.

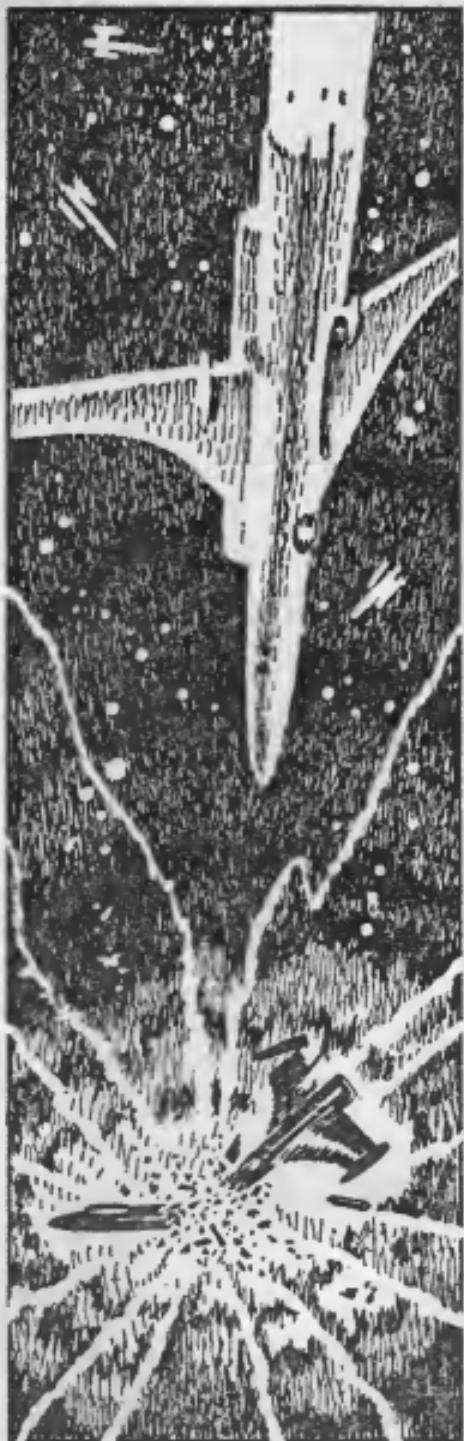
And now—a madman had put those black minds into fighting ships again!

Who else, Steifen asked himself, *could* it be? The ships bore the stamp of their maker, and he would have been amused if he could have forgotten the creatures who manned them. Those black, warty vessels resembled no ship that ever crossed the heavens. They were Garahnell's pointed symbols of Evil, complete with pathetic, shark-like faces on snubby bows.

Larrehne, too, saw little to laugh about. Her lovely eyes filled with violet fire. "Balimann—I find this intolerable!"

"Intolerable, Lady?" Balimann said dryly, "no longer madness, then?"

"It is more than madness to



break the Covenant!" she snapped. "And *you*—your guilt is the greater, to know this and do nothing!"

"No, Lady," a little wearily, "I do nothing—because there is nothing that needs to be done. Look there!"

Steifen followed Larrehne's glance past Balimann's gesture. From the skies, vengeful angels fell in screaming silence. And as the black ships were Evil, so the white and gleaming hawks were symbols of Good. *Oh, Lord Garahnell*, Steifen sighed, *what a piteous child's game is this!*

Larrehne looked away, sharing the non-man's thoughts.

Hauteur vanished from Balimann's eyes. His features softened into weariness. "You see, don't you? He is no madman, Lady—no madder than us all. He merely does what he can to be Man—and there is little of that, even done in a manner such as this . . ."

The fleets clashed around them. Harmless fireballs of green, pink, lilac and white lit the sky. Blue petals blossomed against a hull of black Evil and a villain spun away in mock-death.

"You see how it is, Lady?" said Balimann. "My game is the study of an ugly enigma that lies or perhaps does not lie between here and Andromeda. You leap from star to star in a bird that is not a bird, with a man that is

not a man. And Garahnell plays with war toys for his imprisoned Lady—who is neither his, imprisoned, nor likely to thank him for his troubles. Where, then, is the dream of Man?"

He shrugged, and his face was creased with purple sadness as another petal grew and blossomed outside the great window.

VIII

GARAHNELL'S strange actions revealed a different Balimann to Steifen. Pride turned to reflection—the mock and piteous war of his neighbor seemed to bring things to the fore of the Wormkeeper's thoughts that were easier to shrug off through lonely nights—more difficult in the presence of others.

Things are *not* the same here, thought Steifen. We are on the last sprinkled mote of sand before the great sea begins. And all great seas, he told himself, have a certain strangeness.

Balimann, and the Master of Slaughterhouse—both cardboard figures in the most bizarre of plays on a most lonely stage—meaningless, meaningless . . .

I *know* this, he told himself, and My Lady and I have no part in things that mean nothing. Whatever life this play mirrors, we will *not* become a part of it. I *will* believe that . . . !

WE came to see Slaughterhouse, and to view the Great Worm, Steifen. As is so often true, I think, one sometimes finds more than they look for."

Larrehne smiled. A tired smile, yes—but in it Steifen saw a hint of joy, of eagerness. For Lady Larrehne was ever the seeker, he knew; to her all knowledge was a step on the path to truth.

"My mind is with yours," said Steifen. "I sensed that you, too, felt we stood with one foot in reality and one in dreams, there before Balimann's window—with no way of knowing which foot belonged to what. It was most confusing, Lady."

Her eyes sparkled at his words. She leaned forward and pressed his hands tightly.

"Steifen—you saw this? I'm glad—so very glad!"

Steifen found it pleasant to be so near this loveliness—but a poor stimulus for the pondering of real-man philosophy; a thing difficult enough under the best of circumstances. Here, in the eternal rose-quartz dawn of her room, Larrehne's skin retained that quality it had captured in early morning, when he viewed the whole of it so longingly.

"Lady," he asked quickly, fearful that a child could read such thoughts, "I am a non-man, and

can only pursue such questions in an academic manner, but, this thing we felt—it seemed akin to the subject of mystical phenomena—something we have spoken of before."

Larrehne closed her eyes. A finger rested delicately against the soft hair of her temple. "It is, I think, in the sense that we find ourselves feeling peculiarly detached from our surroundings. But," she sighed lightly, "I'm afraid it's a poor mystical experience, Steifen, if we can't tell whether we leave reality or approach it!"

Steifen said darkly, "If this playing at games, this Black against White business of Garahnell's is reality, then I prefer to let he and the Wormkeeper have such realities. I would rather be a puppet in some dream I somewhat understand."

Larrehne frowned. "Steifen, I haven't mentioned this before, but you've probably guessed it in one way or another. I've been most concerned since we began this voyage—and 'reality' is a big part of that concern. While I'm still a novice with the use of the Selfband, I've had several experiences lately which add greatly to my concern. I—well, I believe I've made contact with my Other, that higher Self which guides us all."

Steifen stood excitedly. "Lady! I'm very pleased!"

She shook her head and brought him down beside her. "No, Steifen, it is much too early for congratulations. Guru McBain points out that there is much hard work for the seeker after the Other is found. Still, as I say, though these first contacts have been little more than ghostly whisperings—I am *most* disturbed . . ."

"Lady, in what way?"

"I don't think we've been faced with a choice between reality and unreality, Steifen. It is becoming clear to me that the very strangeness of Balimann's Moon and Slaughterhouse points to a greater truth."

"As you know, McBain teaches that *all* is unreality in this life; a most difficult barrier for even the most advanced of seekers to cross!"

Steifen released a deep breath. "Real-man philosophy again! We have spoken of this, Lady—and it occurs to me our experiences today are no very telling demonstration of Guru McBain's teachings."

Larrehne brightened. "But don't you *see*? They are, they are!"

Steifen shrugged. "I'm sorry, Lady. I cannot see it as clearly as you."

"Why, then," she said excitedly, "is the life we left in such sharp contrast to this one? Why—as you have put it—do we

feel one foot in reality and the other in a dream? Isn't it because these worlds on the gulf of emptiness are mirrors of the worlds we left?"

"Is there a more cutting parody of the Good and Evil we have known back there, than Garahnell's mock war—or the birth-death of Slaughterhouse? When I think of the life we left—Oh, Steifen, it's hard to say which nightmare mirrors the other!"

Steifen is saddened by these thoughts, and the sadness colors his voice. "It seems a picture of futility to me, Lady—not a thing Guru McBain would wish to conclude. Still, perhaps I've become even more fuddled in my thinking than I was when you began. This is very possible."

Larrehne favored him with a gentle smile. "My friend, I'd never accuse you of befuddlement. You are, of course, a born pessimist, and this tends to tip the scales of your reasoning toward the darkest conclusion."

"This, too," he agreed, "is possible. I only pray your eternal hope can tip those scales the other way."

"And that," she answered wryly, "is either flattery or sarcasm—but certainly not philosophy! Still, I accept your challenge. We have yet to see the greatest enigma this dream world of yours has to offer—remember?"

"No, I haven't forgotten, and I'm not likely to," said Steifen. "And Lady, please don't refer to this as 'my' dream world. I claim not a particle of it for myself. Also, if the enigma you speak of is The Worm, and I am sure it is—we must carry the classification of dreams a step further into that of nightmares. No, I'm not at all heartened by this last great challenge . . ."

X

WHILE Steifen was bound to heed his Lady's wishes, he was also programmed to evaluate. Thus, he exercised discrimination, and spared her the job of editing sense from nonsense. This faculty of discrimination also freed him to protect her from subjects he did not feel served to further her sense of well-being. He never glossed over harsh truth—he merely refrained from repeating every painful experience.

For this reason, he made it quite clear to The Balimann that she was not to be informed of Garahnell's gifts, which he viewed in the lock where Balimann had been sensible enough to confine them.

"Rather charming—in a way," mused Balimann.

"In a way that's rather obvious, if I may say so," Steifen answered.

They were supple and lovely creatures, and Lord Garahnell had given them the most attractive attributes of the human female—but they curled about the legs of Steifen and Balimann, and preened themselves, purring in a vibrant, deep-throated *hummmmmmm—hrrrrmmmm* that was essentially feline. Their eyes denied any hint of humanity, and in the end they were simply female cats in what appeared to Steifen to be a state of perpetual heat.

Outside, he faced Balimann stiffly. "Just what did Garahnell have in mind for My Lady to do with these creatures? I see but one use for them; if I am right, this is the foulest of insults to Larrehne of Mourlin!"

Balimann shifted nervously. He inspected a fleck of lint on his sleeve. "I—don't believe Garahnell meant anything unseemly or distasteful by this. His viewpoint differs from yours—or mine," he added quickly. "I imagine he felt these creatures would make excellent handmaidens for a great Lady."

"Hmmmm. Anything is possible," Steifen said dryly. "But I fear your neighbor is again projecting his own bizarre tastes onto others."

"All right," sighed Balimann sharply, "perhaps he is, non-man!" Balimann turned and stalked off down the long hall.

He glanced quickly, almost imperceptively, back at the closed port.

Steifen, who saw things a real man might miss, knew he would never be able to decide whether Garahnell's gifts found their way back to Slaughterhouse . . .

XI

ANOTHER incident Steifen did not report to his Lady: On the other side of the great window, which he asked to be closed, the battle of the white hawks and black demons still raged. Lord Garahnell's quest continued for the Lady imprisoned in his own mind . . .

XII

WITHOUT the distraction of the great mock war, Balimann's study, where Steifen and his host waited for Larrehne to complete her meditations, was a pleasant and comfortable place. Vaulted ceiling rose above real wooden beams in a manner so ancient that few could have said what period was reflected there. The fireplace contained real wood, too—and the Almighty knew where Balimann obtained such a thing. Steifen had seen only one other—in the home of Larrehne's father, where he had begun life, and served until the Master of Mourlin's death.

Balimann, across from Steifen, leaned forward before the crackling flames to fill their glasses with dark wine.

"You know," he said curtly, "you have no need to worry. I am not quite the crude outworlder you mark me as."

Steifen looked up. "What is this, Balimann?"

"You need not concern yourself that I will speak of Garahnell's gift. That is what I mean!" He turned fiery eyes on Steifen. "You judge too lightly and too quickly, non-man. In this, you do your Lady a great disservice."

"I do not need you to tell me how to serve my Lady," Steifen said stiffly. "However, if I have said anything to offend you—"

"Ha!" Balimann was on his feet, an accusing finger aimed at Steifen's chest. "You see? You do it again! Non-man, do you think I live or die on your opinion of me, or Lord Garahnell, or—or those bitchcats in the airlock! God in Heaven—protect me from the ego of the galactic!"

Balimann downed his wine too quickly, and twin red lines stained his cheeks and turned to dark spots on his tunic. Still, the storm seemed to have died, and he continued in a quieter tone.

"Believe what I say, or ignore it—as you choose," he said. "Your over-hasty judgments concern me in only one respect: When you shrug The Balimann

aside, you toss his words out in the same bundle—and my words, non-man, are not to be taken lightly!"

Steifen, irritated, said: "You give them out lightly, my friend."

Balimann hesitated, then nodded in quick understanding. "Yes. My light banter with your Lady was a mistake—perhaps. I did not realize how serious she was about—The Worm. I do now. It will not happen again. That did not work so I have, frankly, changed my personality to suit the need. And I will continue to change it for her until I can convince that stubborn Lady—or you—that it is very possibly worth your *life* to look at that thing!"

Steifen watched the man a long moment. Finally, he nodded. "Perhaps, Balimann. And perhaps I have misjudged some of your motives. Still, I can tell you My Lady has her reasons for taking whatever chance exists. She knows the stories—and she will not be dissuaded."

"It is her life—her sanity," Balimann said coldly. "But I will continue to try. I could not forgive myself if I didn't. Perhaps I would feel better if I knew *why* she feels this great need to come here at all. You have not volunteered this information—nor has she. I haven't pried for it. Now I suppose I am."

"My Lady has told you—" Balimann shrugged disdainfully. "Yes. You have come to see Slaughterhouse and The Worm. That wasn't my question, was it? *Why?* The Lady Larrehne is no simple tourist, flitting about the rim of creation in that fantastic bird!"

Steifen looked abstractedly into the fire. His glass made a hollow sound in the quiet room as he placed it on the table before him.

"You are only partially right, Balimann. Seeing Slaughterhouse and The Worm are not my Lady's end motives. There is a great deal more to it than that. I see no reason why you should not hear the story, since you, yourself, have now become a part of it . . ."

XIII

LADY Larrehne is an exceptional person, Balimann. In these dark times, when ignorance seems the fashion, she seeks ever to expand her knowledge. She is, of course, in a good position to do so. The House of Mourlin has interests in many systems, and little happens on a thousand worlds that does not reach our ears. Thus, a great business empire holds itself together.

"Through these same channels, information often comes

our way that has little to do with Mourlin business—bits and pieces from here and there that may mean nothing viewed separately—but can often mean a great deal when the parts are fitted together."

Steifen shifted in his chair and took a deep breath. He leaned back and looked at The Balimann. "It was in this way, through her study of certain dispatches over a period of time, that My Lady began to realize something was gravely wrong. There were reports of strange, grotesque animals being sold for pets on Centallia. It was rumoured that a man on Bagdar had three Piggies who wore shirts and shoes and accompanied him about his business. Our man on Garalando reported Baa-baas were much in demand for personal servants . . .

"We knew at once where these creatures *had* to come from—Slaughterhouse. There was no other possibility. Lord Garahnell's interests had expanded from the production of meat to the creation of semi-intelligent life-forms!"

"We had already had the dubious pleasure of visiting one of the FTL receivers long before. It is not a pretty sight, as I'm sure you know. Food means nothing to me, of course—but My Lady has not touched meat since that time. And I don't believe many

who saw that operation would go away with different feelings. It is not so much slaughter of animals that offends—the things are long dead and space-frozen when they pop out of no-space. It is the *appearance* of the things that offend—stubby, weak legs, strong enough to propel them from the wombrings to the senders, enough heart and lung to run the pitiful legs, and an ounce or so of brain sacked neatly away with the other organs. — And no head, of course; since there is no need for eyes, mouth or tract. I think this detail offended My Lady more than anything."

Steifen shook his head. "With this memory still fresh in her mind, and the distressing reports of Garahnell's new enterprise before her, My Lady was in no mood for the next event that happened. We attended a party given by a certain wealthy man on Farvir, and for the first time, had the opportunity to see Garahnell's handiwork face to face."

Steifen grimaced. "I won't describe them. I will say only that the party was a bizarre and ugly success—My Lady and I left before too many vulgarities were performed.

"I've met many aliens in my long life," Steifen sighed, "and strange as many of them were, still, they *were what they were*—not intentional parodies of Man,

things with snouts and hooves and fur designed to mock humanity. God knows, humanity itself is mockery enough these days!"

BALIMANN was silent a long moment. "I see," he said finally. "I know, of course, Garahnell has spent no little ingenuity on the design of these—grotesqueries. I had no idea he was exporting the creatures! —And turning a pretty profit, I'm sure!"

His brow deepened and he looked steadily at Steifen. "I am no saint, my friend—I don't pretend to be. There's a certain perverse fascination about those creatures in my airlock—no use denying that. Any man could see it. Garahnell's manufactured an attractive new toy, and I expect the jaded galactic will be more than delighted!"

"I frankly deplore what Garahnell has done. I *hope* I'm still a cut above that galactic mind. Yes—if your Lady is concerned with the moral fibre of her fellow man, she has good reason."

Steifen let out a deep sigh.

"That's not all of it, Balimann—I only wish it were . . ."

"What?"

Steifen smiled grimly. "Do you think *she* has travelled beyond the rim of the galaxy because of a—'perverse fascination'?"

The non-man stood, leaning close over The Balimann's chair.

"Look at *me*, real-man. What do you see? Look closely and you'll see a thing as unhuman as that chair—or this wine glass! I'm a *non-man*. I look like you and speak like you and think like you, but there's not an ounce of flesh or a drop of blood about me. I live forever—and I was never born! I can be destroyed—but I cannot die!" Steifen paused. "Now, Ballimann, what is the difference between me—and Garahnell's creatures?"

Balimann frowned. "This is—unnecessary. I know what you are. You have no reason to compare yourself with them . . ."

"Exactly," Steifen nodded. "No reason at all. We're both creations of Man—but one is merely unnatural, while the other is *artificial*."

Steifen laughed. "Ironic isn't it? Your unnatural creation shares your higher functions—while your flesh and blood monsters have every one of your base, low desires! A non-man has no stomach, but he drinks your wine—he isn't cold, but he warms himself by your fire. I share your emotional capabilities, Balimann, with a brain that responds to all real-man emotions. I'm mentally, if not physically, very capable of *enjoying* this wine and that fire—perhaps more capable than you!"

Steifen sank back into his chair. Balimann looked blank.

"I'm sorry," Steifen said, "I hoped it would help you to understand. Don't you see, now, what concerns My Lady? I can never become Man—but I can't become an animal, either. Garahnell's creatures can never, *never* become Man—there is no danger in that. But somehow—in a way that defies all understanding—the Master of Slaughterhouse has made possible a terrible—and *fruitful*—union. *And now Man can become an animal!*"

Balimann paled. The wine glass fell from his fingers, shattered, and red droplets hissed into the fire . . .

XIV

BALIMANN looked up, finally. The color was drained from his dark face, and life seemed to have left his limbs.

"Man has infinite potential for reaching unimaginable heights," he said harshly, "or inventing new ways of debasing himself. He has discovered the final method." Balimann turned away, staring into the dying coals.

Steifen nodded. "Two creatures—are under study in Mourlin's laboratories. They are both very young, of course—not more than a few weeks old. But already we know we are dealing with an essentially animal mind—there is

no potential for great intelligence. But—*cunning!* I don't believe there is anything that can match them there."

Balimann looked up. He faced Steifen, but his eyes were far away. "I am a man who knows his own race too well, non-man. Even when they know the price they must pay for this pleasure, it will make no difference—I don't know what will stop them—until every world is crawling with snuffling beasts . . ."

"Nor do I," Larrehne's voice came softly, "but I know it is a question that *must* be answered."

Even Steifen was unaware of her presence. He turned as she stepped from the shadows. Before he could rise, her hand rested on his shoulder.

"I'm glad Steifen has confided in you, Balimann; I always approve his dispositions, and I concur in this one. I hope the viewpoint of one so close to this problem will prove helpful."

Larrehne dropped down beside Steifen, and Balimann rose to pour her wine.

"I am shaken by what the non-man has told me, Lady. And while I can offer you no ready answer, I am certainly at your service. I know, now, I believe, what your business is with Garahnell. And *you* must know, now that you've spoken to him once—that speaking to him again will

gain you nothing." He shook his head. "That one will not stop what he is doing."

"No," she said, "I've tried to fool myself into thinking he might yet listen to reason—but I know he will not . . ."

Steifen tensed. His eyes were suddenly cold. "He will listen if I speak, Lady. He will listen, and understand."

Larrehne smiled sadly. "I knew you would have to make that offer, old friend. It has ever been on your mind, hasn't it? Ah, Steifen—you would destroy a world? Even a world of monsters?"

"He would destroy a galaxy, Lady. A galaxy of men who would be monsters!"

Larrehne turned. "And you, Balimann?"

"In a second, Lady. I would happily fight the non-man for the privilege. I see no other way."

"Nor do I," she said, a strange smile passing briefly across her face. "Somehow I knew this—long before we came. I knew the answer would not come from Garahnell. I knew then, Balimann, that it could only come from you . . ."

Balimann stared. "From—me!"

"I know what happened here, Balimann. At least, I know a part of it. I know that Man reached out, and stood here on the beach where his small pond swelled in—

to the great sea. I know he looked out over that sea, toward the far island of Andromeda; looked, and saw what was waiting for him there. I know he turned, and fled back to the Thousand Worlds to scatter the seeds of his shame and despair."

She looked up at Balimann, and her eyes burned with violet fire. "This is where Garahnell's monsters were born—here, ten thousand years ago, at the moment when a newborn giant turned into a stunted dwarf." She shook her head slowly, and a sad smile again creased her face. "What can a man in a cage do, Balimann—but turn into a beast?"

Balimann looked at Larrehne with new respect. "You know much of the story, Lady. I wish, with all my heart, that I could deny you the rest of it. I cannot."

She bowed her head and closed her eyes. "For that I truly thank you . . ."

"I hope I never regret the decision, Lady. I pray I will not." He turned the stem of his glass so it caught the final spark of the dying fire. "I haven't asked what you hope to find in the image of The Worm. I haven't, and I will not. Perhaps you will find an answer to a question I cannot answer myself."

"And that question?"

"Simply, Lady: can we blame Man for erasing what he saw

from the memory of his race?"
Larrehne favored him with a gentle smile. Her eyes were dark stars, very near him, but incalculable years away. "That question has been a part of me too long now. Balimann. A deadly shadow has fallen over Man; he is dying in its darkness—I would see what casts a shadow such as that. . . ."

XV

IT seemed strange to Steifen that the lift should plunge them down toward the center of Balimann's Moon, when the object of their search lay in the deep seas between the galaxies. But, as The Balimann cryptically explained, "There are observatories, non-man—then there are *observatories* . . ."

Lady Larrehne's eyes tilted in a question, and Balimann continued:

"Balimann's Moon houses no ordinary instrument—I assure you. It was not made for staring at dust-mote worlds or puny constellations. It was built, by the first Balimann, for one purpose only—to probe the very heart of Andromeda. And that, Lady, it can do—and more.

"For this, an immense amount of energy is required—and energy we have, the unlimited power of the stars themselves! It is all around us now, stolen from

the cores of a million angry giants, and locked in the center of Balimann's Moon."

That power was there, an unbelievable, terrible surging force, Steifen could not deny. The deeper the lift plunged, the heavier this force weighed upon his senses.

It was a strange feeling for the non-man. He knew the deep, throbbing power of great space carriers, the howling, unchained monsters that plunged across the Barrier as wind rips through a spider's web. An imperceptible coldness pressed against him—this was something different. An age-old thing, but shiny new. A prize that fell from Man's hip pocket when he fled the Great Gulf in terror and scattered his belongings to the dark winds . . .

The lift slowed gently and heaviness returned. The door slid open with a tiny sigh. Balimann moved aside, and Larrehne and Steifen stepped out.

A tiny bulb above the lift door was the only light. Whatever lay beyond its glow was clothed in darkness.

"Please be prepared," Balimann warned. "I can't explain it to you, but the effect is unusual." He turned away and pressed something behind him.

Steifen flinched as brightness exploded around him. Larrehne's strong fingers tightened on his arm and he caught the sound of



her quick gasp of breath. He blinked, looked away, closed his eyes. He opened them again and dizziness returned. A billion tiny Steifens shook their heads and returned his stare.

"Steifen! Steifen, I—" He clutched her arm as she swayed and Balimann made a swift movement. The room darkened and a single dim light circled the carpet beneath them.

"I'm sorry," said Balimann, "it takes some time before you are accustomed to it."

"No," smiled Larrehne weakly, "I'm all right now. Just—dizzy, I think. It is a strange illusion—as if I were trapped in the center of some gigantic jewel!"

"It is no illusion, Lady. We are at the bottom of a large, spheroid room—shaped much like that of an egg. The dizziness and confusion are caused by a multitude of tiny, reflective shards of silvered crystal which project the image of the stars from receivers on the surface. It is the perfection of these projecting planes which rob the eye of balance, and leave it no point of reference. It is also," he continued, "the factor that makes Balimann's Moon unequaled by any observatory in the galaxy. It has been so for ten thousand years, and I think it may not be surpassed for ten thousand more—or never, perhaps, unless the

worlds of men change their courses."

"The perfection of these instruments, Balimann," said Steifen dryly, "has already changed the course of Man once. Had your ancestor's image of The Worm been *less* than perfect, perhaps the road to Andromeda would be filled with ships, now—and your race reaching out instead of turning in upon itself."

"Steifen!" Larrehne said sharply, "that was most unfair!"

Steifen shrugged. "There was no offense intended toward The Balimann, Lady. I was merely indulging in irony again."

Balimann laughed grimly. "And you're right, of course, non-man! The successful explorer is the one ignorant of the terrors he faces over the horizon. The Great Captains who gathered here a hundred centuries ago didn't have that advantage—Oh, no, they definitely did not!"

SUDDENLY, his hand swept out in a deft, practiced movement. Lights sprang on beside them, circling a shallow bowl at the base of the spheroid hall. Larrehne and Steifen turned as sudden movement caught their eyes.

Dark iris shadows hummed, widening on the azure carpet in neat rows. Black-sheathed, silver stalks pushed into the light,

sang, hissed, filled the amphitheatre with alien wheat that suddenly bloomed, spread black wings and flashed silver limbs—*snap!*—into rigid silence . . .

"It is a humbling thing," whispered Larrehne, "to see legend come to life. Even one that died unborn."

She gazed out over the silent rows, the dark and empty thrones. She read the silver-hued crests emblazoned on black, spelled the names so long unknown—DeLoyega, Graham-Martin, Pieter, Vashiel. . . .

Larrehne stopped. She squinted at a crest too much in shadow, and suddenly knew it was no shadow at all. It was dark, aged—almost ancient among the cold-silver names around it.

"You cannot read it, Lady," said Balimann. "That name is burned from the rolls of the Great Captains. But I know it—it is Marshekian."

Balimann looked long at the dark and twisted crest. Then he turned away in sadness. "This is the rest of the story, Lady. The part that does not even live in legend; but only in the heart of The Balimann.

"They gathered here, The Hundred, The Great Captains. Their ships circled this moon like giant, hungry hounds, power throbbing in their angry souls, waiting for their masters to turn them loose across the

void. But their masters were here, and they had just seen what waited for them there, in the Great Gulf.

"The Captain of Captains," Balimann went on, "was Stergoftsen, a giant with flaming red hair. When it was all over, he rose and turned to them, a sea of brave men's faces gone pale and slack. Seeing those faces, he must have known; but he tried to cover his own fear—and theirs—with his fierce and blazing eyes. He told them, simply, calmly, that they would return to their ships, that nothing had changed, nothing—they would sail into the Great Sea, demon or no demon, and the first man to bolt would feel the heat of his blaster."

"And Marshekian," said Larrehne softly, suddenly understanding the darkness of the chair's crest, "Marshekian was the first . . ."

Balimann nodded. "He was, Lady. And a finer, braver man has never lived, so the legends say. He stood, slowly, facing the Captain of Captains. 'No,' he said, we are going home, Stergoftsen. We are going home, now.' And Stergoftsen looked at him with deep understanding, and raised his blaster and fired.

"Then he turned away, dropped the weapon; his great head shaking in his hands. Stergoftsen wept shamelessly for

the first time in his long life . . .

"Then" Balimann said grimly, "the Captains, no longer the Great Ones, no longer The Hundred, but merely men, now, lowered their heads and left the two alone—Marshekian, dead; Marshekian, most dearly beloved brother of Stergoffsenn, who died because his brother had asked him, with his eyes, to let him be chosen; to let him die for all the rest.

"And when the others had gone, Stergoffsenn covered his brother with his own golden cape, and wept no more. He gazed up into the heights of this very room, where a moment before the terrible image had appeared to wreck men's dreams. Then he looked once more at the quiet shape under the golden cape, and Balimann pointed, "to the right of where the non-man stands."

Larrehne and Steifen caught the hint of darkness stained on azure blue, death ten thousand years old, and turned away.

Balimann glanced at Larrehne, then the non-man. He let his eyes rest on the woman. "You are still ready, Lady? After the story is finished?" He gestured toward the hundred black and silver thrones behind her.

"I am, Balimann." She drew herself up, straight and tall. "But you will have to make other seating arrangements, I fear. I'm sorry, but I find that with a

wealth of chairs there is not a one I care for."

Balimann smiled softly. "Ghosts, Lady? Surely not."

"If you will," she said distantly, her eyes resting beyond the pool of light, beyond, even, the darkness above. "These thrones of The Hundred carry enough of a burden now, Balimann. I can sense this, and I know Steifen feels much he does not say. If I fail, too, then it would be a sad thing to drape another mantle of guilt over this poor furniture, would it not? . . ."

XVI

INDEED, the non-man sensed much he kept to himself—but the strange, ice-borne thoughts added more to puzzlement than knowledge.

What was *happening* to him! For a quick second he felt near-panic, a real-man emotion he had never known. As the lights dimmed, and the caressing arms of his couch enfolded him, he gazed up into darkness. A deep shudder trembled through his body. The thoughts that flooded in upon him were a strange mixture of non-man prescience and human fear and superstition. He was born—he was dying. A dark shadow bore down upon him with awesome speed . . .

He laughed hollowly to himself. This, then, the moment he

had feared for *her*! And now, fingers tight against his thighs, psuedo-sweat beading on synthetic brows, he sensed no fear from the form on the couch beside him. No. Fear was much closer than the Lady Larrehne.

My God! My God! What is happening to me!! He bit his lip until busy invisible nodes signaled psuedo-flesh was being damaged.

He lay back in his chair, trembling, as his body manufactured and bathed him in unfamiliar acid. Steifen, learning a brand new human emotion after all these years—one every real-man child was better equipped to handle. Steifen the non-man, shivering, eyes wide-staring in blackness, afraid of the dark. . . .

. . . Calmness returned. Non-man controls clamped down on errant emotions; did not destroy, and negate the usefulness of these new things, but came to a silent understanding between the subjective and objective impact of fear on the electronic psyche.

The wave swept over him, abated, was replaced with controlled understanding. He became aware of physical sensation again, dimly aware of The Balimann himself. Somewhere, the gaunt frame bowed tautly over a bubble of blackness; strong fingers flicked through clusters of singing lights that sucked the

power of the stars, and held far galaxies squeezed within the high dome . . .

Steifen floated over black seas. He gazed down, let his vision sink in dark water . . . deep . . . deep . . . deep . . .

Below, a dim shape swimming in velvet currents. Larger . . . larger . . . a luminous pearl, a lamp's soft glow through midnight fog . . .

Softness cracked wide! Pearl shattered! Diamond brilliance crashed out, broke free in aching streaks of splintered color. Needle shards of brittle-green ice-blue bloodsharp-red pierced darkness. Cold, cold, cold . . . Andromeda! A black, depthless sea—and on the other side—Andromeda . . . Andromeda . . .

Then . . . gone! Steifen blinked. No, it was there—but Balimann had dimmed the jewel galaxy to a pale ghost. It was there, after-image gray, and before it, between Steifen and faint Andromeda—

A sharp chill of apprehension jolted him. Muscles tightened toward pain. *Now! Now! Now!* Plastic veins sprayed cold acid through steel bones.

Then: *What? What? What?* No. That isn't it. Not yet. But he knew it was. Ice melted. Relief

flooded in warmly, and Steifen laughed aloud.

It was appalling, beyond belief! Mentally, he stamped out a legend with his finger, blotted out ten thousand years of terror with the joint of a thumb. This lacy filament of green, a nebulous wisp of starry ribbon—twisted vaguely like a worm, yes—but Lord, no Eater of Worlds!

Balimann raised the magnification, and green filament became a jade-ice necklace tossed on velvet . . .

Again—now it stretched across the whole range of vision, big enough to see a billion clusters of tiny emerald suns . . .

Again—a single cluster of the brilliant, crowded suns, spun together with misty olive webs . . .

And again—a dozen green suns, alone; some aching brilliant, some merely bright, and some blurred behind dim veils, all imbued with flowing movement, and—

—AGAIN!

AGAIN!

AGAIN . . . !

XVII

. . . How long, now, has it been? How far, how far . . . ?

THESE are things I cannot answer—such questions are meaningless to me. In the Control Room of the *Gryphon*, a thou-

sand shiny eyes that saw and measured everything now see nothing. All the quivering needles sleep silently against red zeros. . . .

One thing I know—*some* measure of time and distance separates my ‘now’ from the things that happened on Balimann’s Moon.

How many non-miles and no-years lie between, I cannot say. I sit alone in a great lost ship and stare at silent clocks, imagining that frozen hands move again. As a blind man savors the memory of that last bright moment, I, too, reach back and taste every jewel second of real-time.

. . . Balimann’s face is frozen forever in my ‘now.’ Every line, every twisted plane—just as it was when my shadow touched him and he turned to show me his fear.

I felt great anger for him then. I weighed that fear, and knew it was stronger than any grief for her. But I did nothing. He was a real-man. I expected no more.

I brushed him aside, and for a long moment stood gazing down at My Lady. I closed my eyes, reached out and sensed the gentle quietness in her mind, the soft stillness of her heart. Of my thoughts, then, my feelings—I shall say nothing. These things belong to me.

“Non-man—please!”

My dream shattered. I turned away from her, slowly, opened my eyes, and let anger rise and turn my arms to tight cords.

"She is dead," said Balimann. "She—is dead. I—know . . ." His voice was an urgent whisper, a moth beating nervously against the flame. He was watching me. Very carefully. Anxiously. His fear was a great thing within him.

"Still," he chattered, "still, there are things that can be done—sometimes. You know? A chance, non-man—!"

Somewhere, he had found a Re-Lifer. It floated beside him, rocking gently, humming its soft red tune. His eyes darted from me to the Re-Lifer, and back again. He bit his lip, hesitated.

"We must—try," he said, "if we wait longer—"

He suddenly jerked forward, tried to push past me. I gripped his arm in steel. He stared at me, paled, and I let him go. He fell back, rubbing the numbness.

I laughed, and his eyes widened as the harsh sound broke the stillness. "You, real-man, and that poor machine with its hummings and groanings? You think you can reach *her*, now? You think that is *all* you have to do? New lungs with new air—a new heart pumping with vitality and life? And what are you going to do, Balimann—wire her *soul* together again?"

He stepped back quickly, and I turned away from him and gathered that small, silent form in my arms. Then I walked across the deep carpet toward the blue glow of the lift.

"All right!" he yelled after me. "Kill me, then, if you will—But I will speak! You blame *me* for this! I know—I can see that and I will not bear that burden for you—!"

I turned slowly and looked at him. "No *false man* can place that upon me!" he said harshly. "I gave you warning—you could have stopped her—and you *did not*. I couldn't stop *you*, false man—even though I *knew what was there, felt—*"

"Do not tell me what you feel, Wormkeeper," I said tiredly. "Please. I know what you feel. I can read those things as if they were written in the air before your eyes. You *feel* that I might kill you. You *feel* that you might suffer. Other than this, there is little in you . . ."

"That isn't *true*! I did not want this! I warned you—!"

I shook my head. "Warn? And how could you *warn*, Balimann? Do you think I do not know, now? No one knows better than I, real-man. You cannot *warn others of things you have not seen your-self!*"

His face went white and his whole body staggered backwards.

"I have seen!"

"No. You have walked a little way into the forest, perhaps. You know the shadows of the beasts that dwell there. But you sent My Lady and I along the deeper path—the one you feared to walk."

I held him with my eyes and he did not move. "This is your crime, Balimann. You are not The Worm's keeper. It—is yours!"

Something broke inside him. All the man spilled out and left a hollow thing standing in its place. I turned away, and let the lift enclose me. I did not need to kill this real-man for his perfidy. He could take care of his own dissolution better than I. . . .

. . . Perhaps I am wrong. Perhaps Balimann will once more find his manhood. It may be that when the beasts swarm over his moon—as they will, I know; there, and on the many worlds of the Great Wheel—then, perhaps, the spark will glow again, and he will fire until his weapon is hot and empty, and die with the laugh of heroes on his lips.

I hope this is so. I hope the blood of past greatness returns to the veins of man. For men *did* know greatness once, I know. The Great Captains fled when they saw their enemy—yes. But they *still knew* the shame they brought upon themselves. In that time, they failed as a man fails.

They *were men*—they could

not have faced what they did and come away without madness if they had not been men. There are not even non-men like that. I, too, went insane at the sight of the enemy, for I am an imitation of man, and no better.

But I am also a machine, and a machine can sometimes correct the tangled, twisted circuits of madness. It is not so easy with a man.

What, then, did I see, there in the darkness of Balimann's observatory? What do I know of the thing that is the Nightmare of Man? I know all—and I know nothing. I know that something *seems* to be coming from Andromeda. I know that sometimes it is coming at a great, incredible speed—and sometimes it is not there at all. I know that it cannot be measured, recorded, or classified. I know that I cannot describe its horror so that another will understand it—because its form is not form, its shape is not shape. It is *there*, in the great nebula of The Worm. Again, it is not there at all. But it *feels* there . . .

I see there is no way. I cannot tell you of the thing itself, but only of the nightmares it brings—the projection of the thing that it really *is*. And this—is close enough to madness.

Sometimes I can see them, chittering and howling in the veiled green cloud. Sometimes I

see a black, ape-like thing that turns into a loathsome, mindless creature like the most terrible of sea-things. There are a million—a billion of them. All of them are different—all are the same.

Sometimes they die—or cry—or pray—or entwine themselves in unexplainable obscenities. More often, even this shadow projection of The Worm is so alien that I cannot say what they do. Perhaps that is what The Worm itself is—a projection of some other, more alien and unexplainable creature. And that creature. . . .

This is all I can convey to you. And it is nothing—nothing. I know only that I travel at speeds I cannot know toward this great enigma. Toward the brightness of Andromeda, and the green cloud that hangs before it. It is a journey that passes in a second—or a million years—I do not know. I cannot.

My Lady sleeps, still and silent, in the death that is not death, but something else I cannot explain. It is the death I could not—would not—convey to Balimann.

She is here—somewhere—with me. Her body rests in the great Control Room in the eye of *The Gryphon*—and it is she who sends us on through no-space and no-time—it is she who would not let me turn Garahnell's world into a great sun, would not let

me destroy the beasts mankind nurtures in his soul. This is not her way, this changing of destinies. Her way is another, and I obey her silent wishes that whisper about me.

This is her way. We left the beasts that spawn from within far behind—and face the beast that comes from without . . .

There is, then, but one thing more. . . .

I cannot understand it and I try not to think upon it. I know, that while we lay there, My Lady and I, in Balimann's observatory, she reached out and gently touched my mind with hers. We lay there and watched the horror come in upon us, and for that moment, we were one.

It was only for a moment. She could not take me where she was going—but she *wanted* me to see—to know—to *understand*. I saw. But I did not understand. I saw evil, horror and sensed what they were—but I did not understand. I know only this:

I saw my gentle Lady reach out with a cry of great joy and embrace these obscenities and take them to her, as a woman takes a lover she has waited for through long eternities . . .

I, Steifen non-man, saw only loathsome evil. What did she see, that I did not? Why does she embrace what all men flee? I do not know. *I do not know. . . .*

THE END

AMAZING STORIES

JACK WILLIAMSON: Four-Way Pioneer

By SAM MOSKOWITZ

"It is a pity that the quality of Stewart's writing is such that this 'space opera' ranks only slightly above that of a comic strip adventure."

THAT section of a review of *Seetee Ship* by Will Stewart was brought to the attention of the editors of THE NEW YORK SUNDAY NEWS, the world's richest newspaper. The review, written by Villiers Gerson, appeared in the Sunday book-review supplement of THE NEW YORK TIMES in September, 1951. The management of THE NEW YORK SUNDAY NEWS had been seriously worried about the effect of television on their circulation and advertising revenue. They were exploring various means to offset this probability. One of their solutions was to feature an exclusive, non-syndicated comic strip. They wanted a writer a cut above average to handle the continuity.

In Portales, New Mexico, Jack



Williamson's telephone rang. It was John Gardner of THE NEW YORK SUNDAY NEWS. The editors had decided, on the basis of that review, that he was just the man to write their new comic strip. They had discovered that Will Stewart was his pen name and

called long distance to see if he would work for them. Williamson gasped in surprise. Finally, in his southwestern drawl, he agreed. He flew to New York where it was decided that a Sunday page to be called *Beyond Mars* would be constructed from the background of his books *Seetee Ship* and *Seetee Shock*, adventures in the mining and utilization of contraterrene matter in the asteroid belt.

It was doubtful if the editors of THE NEWS were aware that they were employing the services of one of the most distinguished names in science fiction; an author who had earned a half-dozen reputations for outstanding performance in various aspects of science fiction and who had powerfully influenced several major trends. Now they had given him the most lucrative assignment of his life, not on the basis of accomplishment, but as the result of a critic's snide comment! Not even John Stewart Williamson's own plots ever had a stranger twist!

WILLIAMSON'S youth was a far cry from the lush fantasies of his later writing. It was spent in hard work on his parents' struggling farms. His mother, Lucy, and his father, Asa, had both been teachers before they were lured to the southwestern territories of the U.S.

For a while—until the Mexican Revolution—they lived in Mexico. Then the family—Jack was born in Bisbee (Arizona Territory) on April 29, 1908—moved to New Mexico. He, his brother and two sisters, labored to keep the farm going. There was no time for formal schooling (his early lessons were given him by his parents) until he was 12. Long isolated, young Williamson was shy, an introverted day-dreamer. He retreated to a world of books.

One of his friends, a radio ham, subscribed to Hugo Gernsback's RADIO NEWS. In March, 1927, the friend got a sample copy of Gernsback's new magazine, AMAZING STORIES. The friend showed it to Williamson. He was fascinated by the Poesque description of a civilization of non-human intelligences discovered in the bottom of an extinct Alaskan volcano, as brought to life by the magic of A. Merritt in *The People of the Pit*.

Williamson scraped together enough money to subscribe to AMAZING STORIES. His subscription started with the June, 1927, issue containing the second installment of Merritt's *The Moon Pool*. The images that poured from *The Moon Pool*—The Shining One; Lakia, the hand maiden; The Silent Ones; Yolara, priestess of the Dweller; Olaf, the Norseman; The AKKA, batrachian-like race; the Green

Dwarf; and the Ancient Ones—induced pleasant euphoria to most, but they fired Jack Williamson with a crusading fervor. There was now but one God, A. Merritt, and his prophet was Jack Williamson.

Stories began to pour out of Williamson's typewriter with a chronically purple ribbon. *The Flying Flowers*, *The Abyss of the Scarlet Spheres*, *The Alien Plane*, *Under the Cavern's Roof*, *The Castle of the Seven Gates*, and *A Prince of Atlantis*. All of these stories were sent to AMAZING STORIES and all were returned. A sustaining note of encouragement resulted from winning an honorary mention for an ending submitted to an unfinished story in AMERICAN BOY.

This ending incorporated the idea of an undersea world which Jack Williamson would eventually use in a short novel, *The Green Girl*.

THE first knowledge that he had finally made the grade as a professional writer came shortly after he enrolled at West Texas State Teachers College in 1928, when he received the December, 1928 AMAZING STORIES with a cover by Frank R. Paul depicting a scene from his story *The Metal Man*. The editor had clearly recognized Williamson's literary deity since he blurbed: "Not since we published 'The Moon

Pool' has such a story as this been published by us." *The Metal Man* concerned radioactive emanations from a form of intelligent crystalline life which turn all objects into metal. The enthusiasm which it aroused transcended its qualities. But in trying to capture some of the elements of A. Merritt, Jack Williamson had undoubtedly struck the right chord.

The sale of *The Metal Man* dissipated all interest in academic study. The entire Christmas vacation of 1928 was spent writing a short novel, *The Alien Intelligence*, which he sold to Hugo Gernsback's newly formed SCIENCE WONDER STORIES (July and August, 1929). The editors appeared most impressed with Williamson's concept of a mysterious insect race whose brains had grown so large that they were sustained and transported in metal bodies. The belief that intelligence could evolve in the most alien forms was to become a trademark of Williamson's stories.

Williamson left school at the end of his second year and plunged whole-heartedly into fiction. He scored a resounding success with *The Green Girl*, published as a two-part novel in the March and April, 1930 issues of AMAZING STORIES. His opening sentence, "At high noon on May 4, 1999, the sun went out!" is a frequently quoted classic extreme

of a school of writing that believes you should get right into your story. Overlooked was a far more significant element. The action of the story takes place in a strange world under the sea, where the roof of water is suspended in delicate balance by a gas made up of *anti-matter*. "You know that science has held for a long time that there is no reason, *per se*, to doubt the existence of substances that would repel instead of attracting one another," one of Williamson's characters explains, therein planting the seed that would eventually result in the contraterrene matter stories under the Will Stewart name.

The Green Girl incorporates atomic energy weapons, intelligent flying plants that can be trained to fight or wash dishes, along with the action and colorful backdrop of the old scientific romances. In effect, Williamson was to become a "bridge" author between the school exemplifying pure escape in the tradition of Merritt, Burroughs, Otis Adelbert Kline and Ralph Milne Farley, and the then current focus on scientific ideas which Hugo Gernsback strove for in his magazines. The influence of Merritt and, to a lesser degree, the S. Fowler Wright of *The World Below*, was to pervade the bulk of what Williamson would write for the next three years. Yet his ability to come up with a spec-

tacular story device, if not a new idea, gained for him the title of "The Cover Copper" in the early science-fiction fan magazines, since the subject matter of his stories provided a never-ending source of provocative illustrative material. Of his first 21 stories, 13 gained a cover.

Typical Williamson were ideas like the following: the notion of the Heaviside layer supporting forms of life (*The Second Shell*, AIR WONDER STORIES, Nov., 1929); a girl who is permitted to remain alive by a civilized race of Antarctic crustaceans because they like her singing (*The Lake of Light*, ASTOUNDING STORIES, April, 1934); a tiny artificial planet kept suspended in a laboratory (*The Pygmy Plant*, ASTOUNDING STORIES, February, 1932); or a beautiful lady flying around in space who asks entry into a space ship (*The Lady of Light*, AMAZING STORIES, September, 1932). Williamson was never without a new idea or a novel situation.

Williamson loved jewels, and used them as a catalyst to the fourth dimension in *Through the Purple Cloud*; (WONDER STORIES, May, 1931); as the key to eternal life in *The Stone From the Green Star* (AMAZING STORIES, October and November, 1931) a super-science epic of the far galaxies related in symbols of *The Moon Pool*; and as a pathway to

a primeval-stage planet in the lusty adventure *In The Scarlet Star* (AMAZING STORIES, March, 1933). The jewels, like the vortices of light, the outre cities inside volcanoes, hidden valleys, other dimensions; the monster-like aliens with an aspect of benevolence, are all of obvious derivation.

Perhaps Williamson's devotion to Merritt might not have lasted so long if he had not received encouragement from that author in the form of a letter praising *The Alien Intelligence*.

THE crown jewel of this phase of Williamson's writing was undoubtedly *The Moon Era* (WONDER STORIES, February, 1932). The protagonist, falling away from the earth in a space ship, finds himself moving back in time and lands on the moon when that satellite is still a young world possessing water, air and life. There he allies himself with The Mother, the last of a race of Lunarians trying to escape to the sea, with the seeds of her young in her. She is pursued by The Eternal Ones, a civilization of brains in gigantic robot bodies, who originally were an offshoot of her race. The physical and mental qualities of The Mother are sketched with such delicacy, the symbols employed to convey the desired mood so unerring, that the unfolding of events achieves

a complete suspension of disbelief building to a poignant climax.

The man who was to play the biggest initial role in directing Williamson away from Merritt was Miles J. Breuer, M.D. Breuer was a successful physician in Lincoln, Neb., who wrote science fiction for the love of it. For off-beat ideas handled with depth and maturity he scored high. His remarkable novel *Paradise and Iron* (AMAZING STORIES QUARTERLY, Summer, 1930) portraying the ultimate in automation dominated by thinking machines, ranks at the very top of stories dealing with that subject.

Williamson admired Breuer's originality and wrote him when he saw his name listed as a member of The Science Correspondence Club of which they both were members. Williamson was eager to learn more about the writing craft and Breuer was willing to help. Breuer suggested a novel paralleling the American revolution but with the locale in the future and on the moon. The result was *The Birth of A New Republic* which appeared complete in the Winter, 1930 AMAZING STORIES QUARTERLY. Williamson did virtually all of the writing, but under the strictest discipline, submitting the outline of every chapter for approval to Breuer. The result was a highly ingenious detailing of a future civilization, but not a narrative

in any true sense since the entire novel was a blow-by-blow description of a future revolution with virtually no other story line at all. *The Cosmic Express* (AMAZING STORIES, November, 1930), a well-done spoof on interplanetary stories, was also heavily influenced by Breuer and notable for use of matter transmitters for space travel and a brilliant prediction that westerns would dominate television.

"Breuer was an antidote to my own tendency toward unrestrained fantasy," Williamson acknowledges. "He insisted upon solid plot construction, upon the importance of real human values in character, and upon the element of theme."

Despite his reader acclaim and steady sales record, Williamson found that a writing career had failed to bring him complete satisfaction. He realized the trouble rested in his own personality. Shy, sensitive and withdrawn, he made few friends. He considered taking up psychiatry as a profession, but was discouraged when David H. Keller, practicing in that field, and his friend Breuer both told him of the time and money required. He briefly flirted with the idea of becoming an astronomer, then settled for a philosophy major at the University of New Mexico. He rolled into Albuquerque in the fall of 1932 on a freight car, as the finale to a

summer of "riding the rods."

RETURNING from Albuquerque in 1933, Williamson secreted himself in his shack on the family ranch and started a novel. His biggest coup of 1933 had been the publication of *Golden Blood*, a colorful, lusty action novel in WEIRD TALES, but it brought him more prestige than sustenance, since a bank closing held up payment from that magazine. It was essential that his new novel, *The Legion of Space*, score effectively and be paid for quickly.

But between the time the novel was started and completed, the entire complexion of the science fiction market changed. Previously, Williamson had unerringly scored with every market he had tried. The promptest and best paying market had been ASTOUNDING STORIES. However, ASTOUNDING had ceased publication with its March, 1933, issue (carrying *Salvage in Space* by Jack Williamson). While there was little question that other science fiction magazines would accept *The Legion of Space*, payment (on publication, common in those Depression days) might conceivably be one or more years off. It was turned down by ARGOSY. Almost frantic, Williamson providentially received a letter from Desmond Hall, announcing that he was now assistant to F. Orlin

Tremaine at Street & Smith, where ASTOUNDING STORIES was to be revived. Payment would be 1¢ a word on acceptance and they desperately needed short stories, Hall wrote. Williamson dashed off three shorts and a novelette, all of which were bought. Then he learned the magazine was altering its policy to run long novels. So Williams sent off *Legion of Space*.

The Legion of Space had many of the epic qualities that had made the space operas of E. Smith or John Campbell so popular. Yet, the smashing impact it was destined to make as it rocketed along for six installments, commencing in ASTOUNDING STORIES' April 1934 issue, was predominantly due to a single character, Giles Habilula, an obese, lame, heavy-drinking, complaining old man with a sublime genius for opening locks and a manner of speech distinctively his own:

"Bless my bones! We can't go there! 'Tis beyond the system—six light years and more! A mortal distance, when it takes a precious ray of light six blessed years to cross it! Ah, there're ten thousand mortal dangers, life knows! I'm a brave man—you all know old Giles is brave. But we can't do that. Of all the expeditions that ever went beyond the sys-

tem, only one ever came back."

The idea for *The Legion of Space* had come to Jack Williamson from a lecturer in a course in Great Books at the University at Albuquerque who told how the Polish novelist Henryk Sienkiewicz had borrowed characters from Dumas' *Three Musketeers*, plus Shakespeare's bawdy old Sir John Falstaff, for a great historical trilogy. If it worked for Sienkiewicz, Williamson thought, it would work for him. So, quite literally, the Three Musketeers of Space, accompanied by a space-age, lock-picking Falstaffian replica, set out to a rousing series of adventures to discover the secret of AKKA, the ultimate weapon. AKKA develops to be little more than a ten-penny nail, but the fate of mankind depends upon it.

Like Sienkiewicz, Williamson developed a trilogy, following *The Legion of Space* with *The Cometeers* (ASTOUNDING STORIES, May to August, 1936) and *One Against the Legion* (ASTOUNDING SCIENCE FICTION, April to June, 1939). The Cometeers were a seemingly immortal race of energy creatures who controlled a collection of sundry worlds collected in a green comet tail 12 million miles long, and who propelled this interstellar sargasso through the galaxy feeding on the life forces of creatures of the worlds they capture.

The term *Cometeers* was eventually to be used by science fiction fans for special social and business groups. *One Against the Legion* told of the battle of the legionaires to bring to terms one super-criminal and in the process tied up some loose ends of the series. All three novels were eventually put into hard covers by Fantasy Press and have become a permanent part of the nostalgia and sentiment of the science fiction world.

THROUGH all this, however, Jack Williamson remained a lonely man, plagued by a variety of health problems, some of which he strongly suspected were psychosomatic. In hope of obtaining some answers he submitted himself to analysis in the spring of 1936 at the Menninger Clinic, Topeka, Kansas. He continued treatment sporadically until early 1941.

"Although the results of this analysis were not dramatic or spectacular," Williamson noted, "I feel that it was one of the great turning points of my life. . . . It was not so much a matter of making a change in me, as in learning to accept myself more or less as I was. . . . I had seen life as a conflict between emotion and reason . . . and that I found a kind of compromise or reconciliation that ended much of the conflict."

It is quite possible that Wil-

liamson's abrupt switch to grim realism in *Crucible of Power* (ASTOUNDING SCIENCE FICTION, February, 1939) and in portions of *Non-Stop to Mars* (ARGOSY, February 25, 1939) may have been part of his coming to terms with life. Realism was present in the characterization as well as in the plotting of those stories. The introduction of Giles Habilula as a supporting figure had been a milestone, but Garth Hammond, aptly blurbed "a hero whose heart is purest brass," in *Crucible of Power*, was a giant step towards believability in science fiction. Hammond was the man who made the first trip to Mars, and built a power station near the sun, for sheer selfish self-seeking gain. The end justified the means, and he was just as callous in romance as in business. There had never been anything as blunt as this in science fiction before. Science fiction has never achieved much in human characterization, but what little progress it has made is as much due to Jack Williamson as any other author. After he showed the way, not-completely sympathetic and more three-dimensional people began to appear in the genre in the form of old Granny in *Slan* by A. E. van Vogt, the uncouth title character of *Old Man Mulligan* by P. Schuyler Miller, the irascible tycoon in *Old Fireball* by Nat Schachner, and the "witch",

Mother Juju, in *Gather, Darkness* by Fritz Leiber.

Selling to ARGOSY was one of the great moments in Williamson's life, since so many of the old science fiction "masters" had been identified with that magazine. Following *Non-Stop to Mars*, he sold them *Star Bright* (November 25, 1934), where a harrassed little bookkeeper is hit by a meteor particle and becomes capable of performing miracles under controlled circumstances; and *Racketeers in the Sky* (October 12, 1940), where a dishonest quack doctor foils a conquest of the earth but with no redemption in character. Williamson's practiced ability to portray something other than a cardboard hero had finally cracked ARGOSY for him.

Another early tendency in Williamson's work had been a drift toward fantasy and away from scientific logic as the plot unwound. Paradoxically, he began to move in the other direction as time passed and may have sparked the move to explain the supernatural and witchcraft in scientific terms. His most widely acclaimed work in this direction was *Darker Than You Think* (UNKNOWN, December, 1940), where he suggests that humans have the blood strain of homolyanthropus and occasionally there may be a throwback. Williamson had employed that idea once before in *Wolves of Dark-*

ness

(STRANGE TALES, January, 1932) wherein his werewolves are entities from another dimension. The limited circulation of STRANGE TALES, and the fact that it was read predominantly by lovers of the supernatural, prevented any marked effect; but *Darker Than You Think* exerted great influence on Fritz Leiber, and in one specific story on James Blish in *There Shall Be No Darkness* (THRILLING WONDER STORIES, April, 1950), which meticulously explains even the conversion of fur into evening clothes and the reverse.

EARLY in 1942, Williamson suggested to John W. Campbell a series of stories on the engineering problems of making asteroids habitable. Campbell, who had been searching for "new" authors to replace the names that were leaving ASTOUNDING SCIENCE FICTION for the armed services, countered with the suggestion that Williamson combine his notion with contraterrene matter and a pen name. The name was Will Stewart, and the results were two novelets: *Collision Orbit* (July, 1942) and *Minus Sign* (November, 1942); plus one short novel, *Opposites—React* (January and February, 1943). No one guessed the identity of the "new" author, but the stories ranked high and have come to be considered the most outstanding

expositions on the anti-matter theme ever written.

Then, the unexpected: Williamson enlisted in the armed forces. He served three years as a weather forecaster in New Mexico, then in 1945 was shipped out to the Solomon Islands. He flew a number of Marine air missions unscathed, but a routine hernia operation after his discharge in 1946 resulted in an intestinal obstruction which nearly killed him. It took a series of operations to straighten him out.

A civilian again, Williamson read the current output of science fiction, and decided he was equal to it, and turned out *The Equalizer* (ASTOUNDING SCIENCE FICTION, March 1947) about an advance in technology that brings to an end the age of specialization. It was a strikingly modern and effective presentation of the technical factors that might eliminate the need for cities. If any further proof were required that Williamson is one of the most adaptable science fiction writers alive, he wrote *With Folded Hands* . . . in ASTOUNDING SCIENCE FICTION for July, 1947. In that story, robots are given the duty of seeing that human beings do not hurt themselves or each other. They are also dedicated to seeing that men are happy. How they go about it makes for a horror story as well as one of the beacons of modern s-f.

A sequel was almost a command performance, and Williamson labored on a novel ". . . And Searching Mind", in the isolation of the little shack he had built on his ranch. "*With Folded Hands* . . ." was almost entirely Williamson's own creation, but the new story incorporated elements of psi phenomena which Campbell had suggested as a means of defeating the robot guardians. The logical ending of benevolent enslavement had already been used on the first story, so Williamson had no alternative but to switch to a less convincing human victory in the second. It was published in hard covers in 1949 by Simon & Schuster as *The Humanoids*.

Meanwhile, close contact with people in the Army made a hermit-like existence more difficult for Williamson to sustain. Gordon A. Greaves, who had been a fellow student at Albuquerque, was editor of the PORTALES DAILY NEWS. He offered Williamson a job as wire editor. This was to be Williamson's first regular job, and he had a special motive for accepting. While on leave from the army he had visited Portales, New Mexico. There he found, operating a children's clothing store, Blanche Slaten, the girl who had broken his teen-age heart by marrying another boy. Divorced she was bringing up two children. Little over a month

after their first date, the two were married on August 15, 1947.

THE newspaper job lasted only six months, Williamson returning to free-lance writing out of sheer boredom. Fantasy Press turned out *The Legion of Space* in hard covers in 1948. They followed it with *The Cometeers* (incorporating *One Against The Legion*) in 1949. The reissuing of *The Humanoids* as a hard-cover reprint by Grosset & Dunlap in 1950 caused Simon & Schuster to snap up *Seetee Shock*, a novel in the contraterrene-matter series which had been serialized in **ASTOUNDING SCIENCE FICTION**. And it was the appearance of that book in 1950 that touched off the chain reaction that secured the *Beyond Mars* comic strip continuity with the **NEW YORK SUNDAY NEWS**.

While the strip was still running, in 1953, Williamson entered Eastern New Mexico University at Portales to get a better grounding in the sciences. The idea of academic life so appealed to him that even when the comic strip folded he pushed on toward a degree. He later taught English and short story writing, and eventually became an associate professor at Eastern New Mexico University.

Summers he spent working towards his Ph.D. in English Literature. With absolute appropri-

ateness, his thesis was *H. G. Wells, Critic of Progress: A Study of the Early Fiction* (and the early fiction is mostly science fiction). Here he set out to disprove the belief that Wells was "a near-sighted optimist," and underscores the fact that Wells knew that progress would be difficult and uncertain.

Teaching on a college level is now Jack Williamson's permanent career. But science fiction stories continue to trickle out. (One of the reasons he did not quit science fiction writing was that he had convinced the university to permit him to teach a course in the subject, and continued sales were the best credentials as to his qualifications.)

Williamson's understanding of not only the writing techniques, but the changing approach to telling a story, has been repeatedly demonstrated by his incredible adaptability to every shift in science fiction themes and styles. He is an author who pioneered superior characterization in a field almost barren of it; new realism in the presentation of human motivation; scientific rationalization of supernatural concepts; and exploitation of the untapped story potentials of anti-matter.

If science fiction writing is an art that can be taught, there is probably no one in the world better qualified to teach it.

The Intruders

By ROBERT ROHRER

Illustrated by BLAIR

*Space-fear can drive a man crazy . . .
but sometimes not crazy enough.*

HARLEY lay on the floor of the passageway and thought, *House, house, house, house.* He let his eyes drift slowly down from the shining polished steel of the curved ceiling to the dull metal of the air-tight connective door. He stretched out his arms and caressed the close-set iron walls with his fingertips. He tasted the sharp ozone as he sucked it in across his tongue. *House, home . . . you are my home, ship, he thought; my shelter in this place of desolation.*

He had hated the ship on Earth. All during the mock flights it had been a prison, a hot, suffocating coffin. But now things were different. Now Harley loved the ship. It protected him from the awful gulf of cold and darkness outside. It warmed him and fed him. He was safe inside it. Safe.

Only the dull hum of the artificial-gravity generators disturbed the perfect silence of the

ship. Only that and MacMahon. Harley could hear MacMahon's feet swinging against the resili-ent steel girders of the super-structure, *bump-bump, bump-bump.* He had told MacMahon all about the ship's being a home, but MacMahon had not believed him. MacMahon had tried to lock him in the storage vault, so Harley had put MacMahon 'tween hulls.

He pressed his back against the metal plates of the floor. He would never leave the ship. The ship was his house. It protected him, and he would stay in it and defend it forever and ever.

He leaned back and strained his ears, trying to catch any stray sounds. He still hadn't been able to find the monster MacMahon had been talking about over the radio. Harley had been crouching in the companionway below the control room, watching MacMahon. He had heard MacMahon say, ". . . a monster, I

tell you, a monster. I can't find him anywhere. . . . No, he still has it. . . . All right, I'll try to. Out." MacMahon had turned from the radio, clutching to his stomach the hand Harley had hit with the meat cleaver. Then Harley had entered the control room, and MacMahon had tried to force him into the vault, and Harley had put MacMahon 'tween hulls.

But Harley had never found the monster. He wondered whether it was hiding somewhere, or whether it had gotten away. If it had escaped, it might

have gone to bring back more of its kind. . . .

Something crashed against the outer hull. Harley jumped to his feet and stood very still and listened. Distantly, small scratching sounds were vibrating into the ship. Someone was trying to enter the central air lock.

Harley twisted the wheel that operated the pneumatic lock of the passage door; he pulled the door open and sprang up the companionway to the control room. He should have electrified the outer panel of the air lock long before. If he could reach the switches before whoever was outside cut the wiring . . .

He stumbled to the control board and flipped Protective Switches L5, L6, and L7. Then, once again, he stood quietly and listened.



THE scratching still came from the lock in the middle of the ship. Harley brushed the back of his hand over his mouth. He had been too late. Someone was going to enter the ship. Someone was going to break into *his* ship. He ground his teeth together and turned agonizedly to the forward viewport.

There. There, in the lower left corner of the viewport, if he craned his neck, he could see the tail fin of another ship.

And then realization hit him. The monster *had* escaped, and it

had brought back several of its comrades. They were going to blast in and destroy the ship. They were going to . . .

They were going to *try* to destroy the ship. Harley set his jaw and slipped to the companion-way, pressing the warm, comforting walls with the palms of his hands as he descended. He clambered to the fourth level and entered the galley. He walked to the huge, stainless-steel Sanitizer that squatted at one end of the compartment, pressed the necessary buttons on the control board of the machine, and in a second held the meat cleaver he had used once before.

A sharp howling, much like the bark of a seal, filled Harley's ears. The creatures were forcing the outer door of the lock. Once inside the lock itself, they would be able to let themselves into the ship. Harley tightened his grip on the cleaver and started toward another stairway. He would give them a surprise.

Them. Harley stopped. How many would there be? How could he know what weapons they might have, what supernormal powers? They might overcome him before he could kill them all, and then they would be free to do what they wished with his ship—

No. He had to hide. He had to hide and take them individually, or trick them. He cast about for a suitable place of concealment.

His eyes fell on the horizontal slits of the cover of the galley's ventilation duct. Of course! The connected vent ducts that wound through the entire ship were rectangular, and over four feet high; he could hide in them, and have access to any compartment.

He lifted an emergency flashlight from the galley wall; then he quickly slipped the vent covering and its filter off and pulled himself up into the pipe. He slid the cover back into place carefully, and began to pad, in his rubber-soled shoes, toward the air lock. He knew his ship very well; he had been forced to learn every detail of its construction during preflight training on Earth. Now he was glad he had learned.

When he had reached the vent that straddled the airlock, he sat on his haunches and listened. There—there was the hiss of air as the tiny compartment was pressurized; there was the shudder of the turbines as the inner door opened. Clank, clank—magnets on the boots of spacesuits, unnecessary inside the ship. The intruders wore suits; if they didn't take off their helmets . . .

The grating whine of metal on metal sifted through the vent filter. The helmets were coming off. Harley fingered his cleaver excitedly.

Then—voices.

"Well, Captain?"

"You'd think MacMahon

would have heard us and opened the outer lock."

THE creatures spoke Harley's language, and their voices sounded human—but, then, they were distorted slightly by the filter, and the monsters were probably trying to throw Harley off his guard.

"Maybe he's asleep, sir."

A third voice. There were three of them.

"Yeah, it can get rough, handling a maniac."

A fourth voice. Four.

"The air's a little thick in here. They were about due for a visit from us, anyway. Carr, get up to the nose and see how many full tanks of compressed air there are left. Call for MacMahon as you go, but keep your Laser free."

"Yes, sir." Two magnets clanked against the floor as a pair of boots was removed. Fainter footsteps receded toward a stairway.

"What do you think, sir?"

"I don't know. MacMahon should have heard us, even if he was asleep. MacMahon! MacMahon!"

"Want me to go below and call, sir?"

"No, Carr'll get that on the intercom. Something must have happened—MacMahon doesn't radio us for days, and now this. Lieutenant Harley must have

gotten loose somehow—if MacMahon ever got him into that vault in the first place."

Harley barely restrained himself from hitting the side of the ventilation duct. Of course! *MacMahon!* MacMahon had been the monster! He had been radioing his companions when Harley found him in the control room. He must have seen Harley and tried to fool him by speaking of another "monster". Harley smiled. That explained why he had never been able to find the creature—he had already killed it.

"That means the lieutenant may be anywhere in the ship, sir."

"Yes. Probably hiding in one of the smaller compartments with no viewports. That's what these crack-ups usually do. Look, he's covered all the ports in this room."

"Why can't they pick out these loonies in the psych tests, sir?"

"Space fear can hit any of us, at any time. Can't ground everybody."

There was a click, and Harley heard Carr's voice quiver hollowly from the intercom, "Only three tanks left, sir, and no sign of Captain MacMahon or Lieutenant Harley."

"All right, Carr. Try calling MacMahon on the lower levels."

"Yes, sir."

MacMahon's name echoed re-

peatedly up to Harley through the pipes, becoming more and more garbled until it sounded like weak feedback in a loud-speaker. Harley smirked. The things outside probably could not believe that one of their race had been overpowered by a mere human being. He would show them. They were defiling his home, they were trying to trick him by assuming his form, but he would show them that he knew what they were, that a man was not as weak or as stupid as they thought. The echoing ceased.

"There isn't any answer, sir."

"All right, Carr. Stay in the nose."

"Yes, sir."

"We'll have to look for Harley now. And be careful, he may just have MacMahon tied up somewhere, ready to kill if we get too close. We'll each take a third of the ship, and—."

THE captain paused. In the sudden silence, Harley realized that MacMahon's legs were bumping against the girders again as a cloud of meteor dust raked the ship and made it vibrate.

"Wait."

"Huh?" "What?" bump bump bump

"Do you hear that?"

"Hear what?" bumpump, bump

"That—knocking sound." bump

"Yes, sir, I hear it now."

"Where's it coming from?"

Bump bump bump bump

"I can't tell, sir." "Neither can—wait a minute."

Harley heard heavy steps and a scrape.

bump bump

"I think it's coming from inside the superstructure, sir."

bump "You're right. Where are the 'tween-hull hatches located in this ship?"

"There's one on this level."

"Let's see it, Lindstrom. Parker, you go below and check into the other hatches. Keep in contact by radio."

"Yes, sir."

"Carr, take the upper hatches."

"Yes, sir."

"Come on, Lindstrom."

Footsteps. Harley gritted his teeth. The intruders were going to find MacMahon, or the thing that had pretended to be MacMahon. What would they do after that? Perhaps they would become angry and destroy the ship, blast it open so that Harley would be sucked out into the night, out into the cold and the loneliness. Harley shuddered.

He heard clicks drift up the chute as a 'tween hull hatch was snapped open. Voices carried very well in the ducts.

"Shine your light in there, Lindstrom."

Click. Silence, then click.
"Can you see anything?"

"Wait—yes, yes sir, a boot . . . there's a boot hanging down, and it's got something—on it."

"Give me a boost up, and hold your gun ready."

A series of scrapes and grunts followed.

"What is it, sir?"

"It must be MacMahon. I—I can't tell. Give me a hand."

The bumpings that came next told Harley that the monsters were bringing MacMahon back inside. He scowled. He would have to act fast, now. He began to move silently through the duct.

"My God, his head!"

"It's MacMahon, though. See the bars? Harley must be a complete maniac. Parker, where are you?"

Pause. "Outside storage compartment D-14, sir."

"All right, good. Go through all those compartments. Keep your gun out and shoot to kill if necessary. Lt. Harley has murdered Captain MacMahon. Carr, get back to the control room. Lindstrom, get below and help Parker . . ."

The captain's voice buzzed on, but Harley no longer heard it. He was concentrating on the number of the storage compartment, *D-14, D-14, D-14*. He slid down a connecting pipe to the

lower level. The ventilators were numbered on the inside—if he could find Parker before Lindstrom reached him . . .

He dropped to his knees and crawled quickly, hand over hand. Every time his shoulder brushed against a filter, he shined the light against the red number that was painted above each opening. Finally there it was: D-14. Harley put his fingers under either side of the filter and pulled. Then, carefully, he pushed the outside covering out on its hinges. It opened easily, without noise. He saw a figure moving about inside, its back turned. Harley slid through the aperture and dropped quietly to the floor. He was alone with the creature they called Parker.

PACKER did not know Harley was in the compartment until the meat cleaver made a soft *whish* in the air.

Harley worked swiftly, but naturally there was some noise. Almost immediately the voice of the chief monster squeaked from Parker's small waistband radio, "Parker? Lindstrom?"

"That must have been Parker, sir, if Carr is all right."

"I am."

"Stay in the control room, Carr. Lindstrom, get to Parker. I'm coming."

The sound of rapid footsteps echoed through the ship. Harley

finished wrapping something in the piece of plastic material he had torn from the monster's space suit. He had a plan, but it had to be carried out quickly, without giving the intruders a chance to regain their balance.

Harley hopped into the ventilation duct, pulled the cover shut, and replaced the filter. Voices followed him as he padded up toward the nose:

"Parker! Parker! Where—Lord!"

"Is he in here, Lind—oh. Get back, there's nothing we can do."

"But where's his—?"

"Never mind that. Carr."

"Sir?"

"Watch for Lieutenant Harley. He's trying to pick us off singly. He's either going from room to room through the ventilation system or by the girders 'tween hulls. Lindstrom and I are going to look for him together."

"Yes, sir."

Harley dropped cautiously from the duct on the level just below the nose. The chief monster was following the exact pattern of thinking Harley wanted him to.

A 'tween hulls hatch stood at one end of the corridor. Harley walked to it on the balls of his feet, removed his shoes, and then snapped the hatch open as noisily as he could and threw it to the floor. He dropped his shoes into the opening; they bounced down

through the girders with dull thumps. He could no longer hear the two creatures below, but he knew they had heard him. He ran to the companionway that led to the control room and crept to a level at which he was still hidden, but was able to listen to Carr and his radio.

"Did you hear that, sir?"

"Yes. He's 'tween hulls. We're going in by rope."

Harley heard the tell-tale snap of a hatch through the speaker. The blundering, egotistical fools were climbing right into his snare. He smiled. They would pay for threatening his ship, his safety. They would pay. He took his bulky, plastic bundle from under his arm and crawled up the iron stairs until his eyes were level with the control room floor. He could not see the creature they called Carr, but he knew where the intruder was seated.

HE unwrapped the plastic and threw it noisily into the middle of the floor. He heard Carr swivel around in his chair. Then Harley gave what had been inside the plastic a gentle push that made it roll into the control room, directly across Carr's line of vision.

Carr gasped and ran to the thing that now lay on the iron plates. As the monster stood looking down dumfoundedly, Harley

threw the meat cleaver and split Carr's brain down the middle.

Fortunately, Carr had left his waistband radio on the control panel; the others did not hear whatever noise their companion made as he fell.

Harley jumped to the control panel. He ran his fingers over the knobs and dials as he listened to the two evil things conversing below. *Ship, ship, soon we will be alone again.*

"See anything?"

"No, sir."

"It sounded as though he's below us. Hear anything else?"

"No, sir."

They'll hear something, won't they, ship? The artificial-grav generators were capable of exerting a force of 60g; they had been used for simulated take-offs during preflight testing. Harley strapped himself into his chair and set the generator controls for a delayed, progressive increase to maximum g. After maximum g had been reached,

the generator would cut back to normal. Harley threw the master switch, leaned back, and watched the grav-indicator.

"Wait, sir. What's that noise?"

"Sounds like the grav generators. They've been stepped up. Carr, what's going on up there?"

Harley did not answer.

"Carr? Carr!"

"Sir, do you think . . ."

The indicator on the panel jumped to 10g. There was a groan as the shock-absorbing girders 'tween hulls yielded slightly to the pressure of the outer shell.

"Captain, I can hardly move!"

"Harley must have gotten to the control room. We've got to get out of here."

Harley heard the two creatures scuttling up the side of the inner hull. At maximum g, the outer hull would be pulled to within two inches of the inner. The indicator needle jumped to 20g then to 30.

(Continued on next page)

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"Sir, my foot! It's caught!"
"Can't you get it out?"
"No—no. I can't move."
"Pull on the rope. Pull!"
"Can't—get out—my foot—"
"The outer hull's pressing in.
You've got to get free! Harley!
Harley, if you can hear me, stop
this!"

*We won't answer him, ship.
He doesn't exist.* The needle shot
to 40g; the outer hull sank to
within three feet of the inner.

"Captaaaaaain! My foot, it's
crushed, my foot!"

"Harley, for the love of God,
don't do this! We'll take you
back to Earth! We'll take you
away from this place! You'll be
safe! If you stay here much
long . . ."

Then the needle shot up to 50g,
and the outer hull snapped to
within one foot of the inner. The
rest was a confused jumble of
crackling bones and screaming.
Harley lay back in the control
chair and smiled inwardly. Fi-
nally the indicator went to maxi-

mum g, and he was pushed down
into unconsciousness.

* * *

He threw a grenade into the
passage that locked the two
ships, and then watched through
the nose viewport as the alien
rocket slowly drifted away. *They
are gone, ship*, he thought. *I have
saved you from them. We are
safe again.* He turned his eyes
from the terrifying gulf outside
and walked to the companion-
way.

Below, he lay on the floor of
the connective passageway and
let his eyes drift across the shin-
ning polished steel of the curved
ceiling, and down the dull metal
of the air-tight door. He
stretched his arms and caressed
the close-set walls with his fin-
gertips. *Ship*, he thought. *Ship,
you are my home.*

Somewhere, far down in the
heart of the rocket, there was a
hiss as the last tank of com-
pressed air was released into the
ventilation system.

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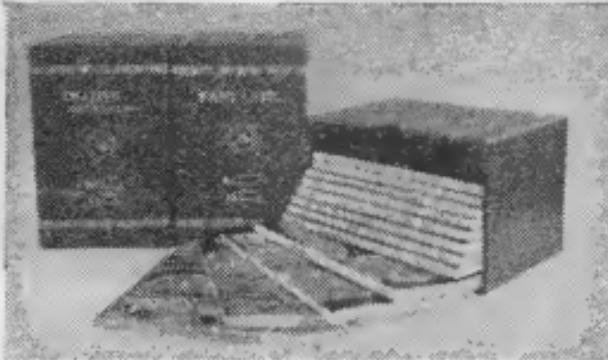
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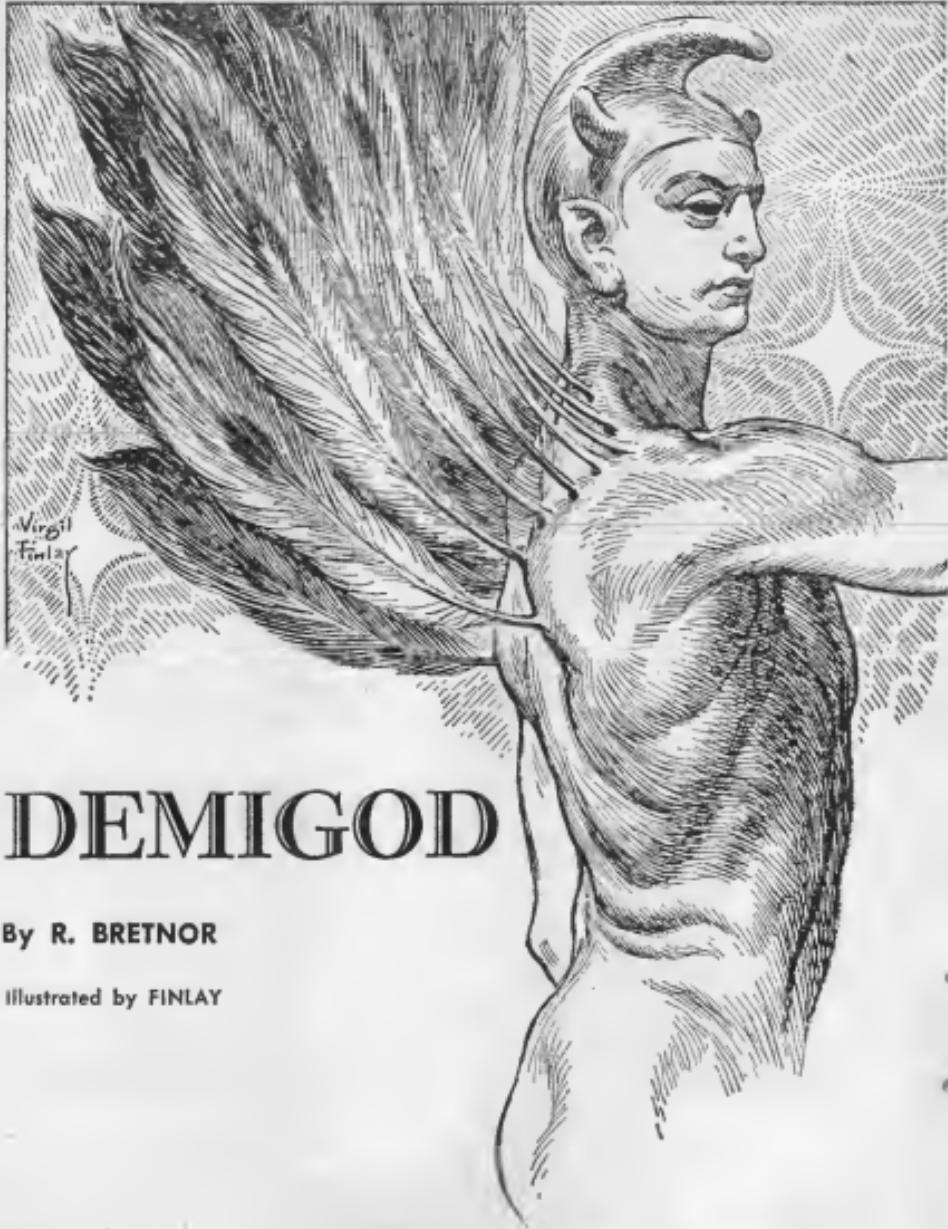
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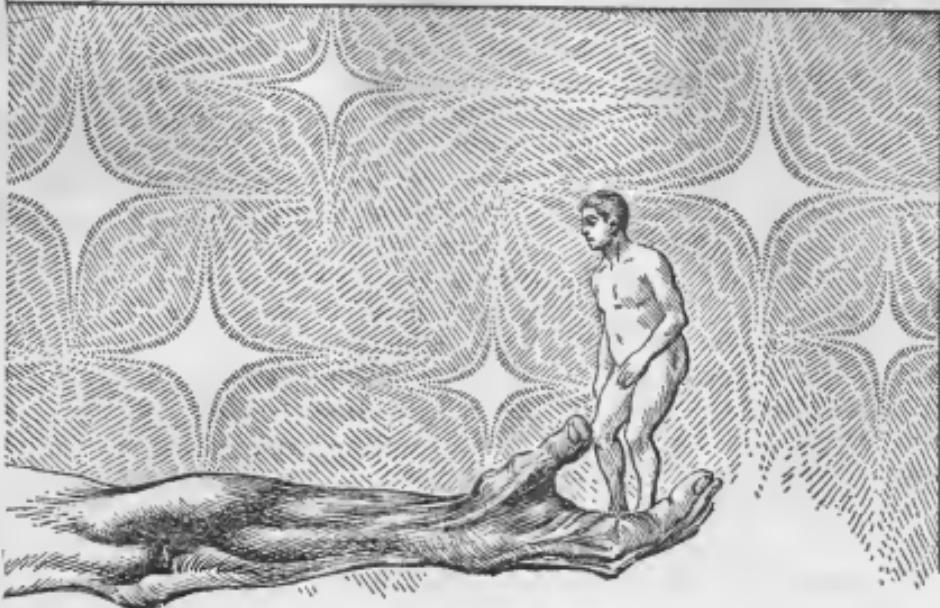
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DEMIGOD

By R. BRETNOR

Illustrated by FINLAY



The yacht harbors of the Riviera are used to peculiar characters. Lucullus Sackbutt and his gourmet orgies, for instance, were old hat. But when the green-gold giant landed and simply sat and watched . . . and watched . . . and listened . . . then even the French became intrigued.

THE Demigod came down to Earth on a pillar of fire. It was green and golden, vivid in the twilight, and cold, and terribly silent. If the vessel riding it had in any way resembled any ship of space or air seen before—if the Demigod had chosen to set down in Trafalgar Square, or in the courtyard of the Kremlin, or even in New Mexico's wide wastes—then instant missiles must either have forced his

dreadful retaliation or else ignited the world's ready powder train without his even being involved in the affair. But the Demigod, for reasons known only to himself and to his kind, chose to descend upon the isle and port of Porquegnan, where Lucullus Sackbutt's yacht, the *Grand Eunuch*, swam at anchor in an emerald sea and an atmosphere delicate with hints of duck and truffle and whispered music.

Splashing its icy flames twice mast-high, the vessel of the Demigod came softly to the broad, white beach. It rested there, like a vast, glowing tulip of lattices and crystal screens. Then it opened and the Demigod emerged. Vaguely manlike, he too was golden-green, as though the halfway heaven of his origin knew no less glorious hues. Plumed spines rising from his shoulders lifted and rustled gently as he breathed. A crested cap, horn-curved and garlanded, grew from his forehead and helmeted his head. And he had eyes. His eyes were hooded, pupil-less, and flat as stones. Between them, a narrow nose, ridge, beak, dropped to the smile-shaped mouth. Here was the impassive essence of those great Buddhas carved when the spirit of the Hellenes spread out through India and Turkestan and China even to Korea and Japan. Here was that essence with every vestige of humanity removed. Here was a Demigod. Here in his nakedness he stood, obviously and very strangely male, wearing only a belt of metal and of mobile gems, and a chatelaine of unknown instruments formed beautifully and beautifully carved.

There were only a few people on the beach when he arrived. There was Hippolyte Ronchi, the large, round mayor of Porquegnan; he was searching for his

youngest grandson, who actually had come home through the back door as he went out the front. There was Mathilde Musiault, one of the town tarts, and an unknown merchant sailor who was happily fumbling her in the lee of a long-ruined longboat. There was a large, middleaged woman named, of all things, Mme. Bovary, who had come to deliver Lucullus Sackbutt's more intimate and finer laundry. And there was Papa Leminou, the retired postman, fishing for panfish from a disreputable small pier.

OTHERS saw him, naturally, and reacted as their various natures dictated, but these five felt the immediate impact of his close presence. Mathilde bucked like a broncho, tossed the merchant sailor a foot or two, and, unhindered by trousers to pull up, ran screaming down the beach—managing, nonetheless, to notice the Demigod's remarkable endowments out of the corner of her eye. The sailor passed her after a hundred yards, and they both disappeared. Mme. Bovary hoisted her skirts up over her head, and, in that indelicate attitude, prepared catatonically to meet her doom. Hippolyte Ronchi, who ordinarily would have taken an active interest in these happenings, simply did not see them. For an instant

—as Hippolyte Ronchi, human being—he stood aghast. Then Lieutenant Ronchi, who had won the *Medaille Militaire* in 1918, assumed command, and he took cover behind an oil-drum. In this observation post, the Lieutenant made way for the Mayor of Porquegnan, a man aware of Science, Literature, and Art, who recognized the visitor immediately as someone from another world. As the Demigod strolled majestically to the sea-wall which defended Porquegnan from storms, and seated himself with one foot on its stones and the other on the beach fifteen feet below, the three facets of M. Ronchi's personality took counsel of each other and decided to work back carefully to a boatshed about fifty feet away, where the municipality had installed a telephone.

As for Papa Leminou, who had inherited a peasant world rich in ogres, giants, and the living memories of ancient gods, and who was just a bit senile into the bargain, he accepted the Demigod with an amused equanimity, as he had accepted armies, wars, women, tourists, and trains which did or did not run on time. "*Bon Dieu!*" he thought. "They have sent the Snowman. Well, nobody can say you aren't a big one, my Abominable friend!" Then, because a fish had been diddling with his hook for sev-

eral minutes, he winked at him, lifted a finger to his lips, and said, very loudly, "Shhh!"

The Demigod, who had been gazing in the direction of the *Grand Eunuch*, turned and inclined his head very slowly until his impenetrable eyes were pointed at the sound. It was an attitude as eloquent as any spoken word; and Hippolyte Ronchi, crawling clumsily backward in the sand, saw in it what the whole world was destined to observe during the next few days, something far stranger than the mere speaking of an alien tongue. As Lucullus Sackbutt's little friend, Prince Alexei Alexandrovitch Tsetsedzedze, expressed it in his soon-to-be-famous essay on the Demigod, "if that Personage ever actually had had to resort to words, it probably would have been as though someone were attempting to translate Mozart and Molière and the Higher Mathematics into the hind-leg rubbings of a cricket."

Papa Leminou, however, missed all this. "You must keep very still, M'sieu l'Abominable," he remarked, reeling in his line, "or you will frighten all the fish away. Well, you're a stranger in the country, so I won't be rude to you." He pulled the hook out of the water. "*Peste!* all my bait is gone. It was not your doing. I suppose I must forgive you. It was the crabs, *n'est pas?*—but I

forget, you do not have crabs up in those great mountains of yours, where there is only snow. No wonder you are naked. Well, I must say I envy you, my friend. If I had your advantages—" He cackled lewdly. "—even at my age I would not waste time fishing, no indeed." He baited his hook with a chunk of ripe sardine and let it sink again. "Now I shall tell you about crabs. Look, they walk like this, sideways, like I move my hand. When they are small and steal my bait, they are a great nuisance. But when they have grown big—ah, then it does not matter that they crawl around eating all sorts of horrid things not fit for Christians. No, no, though they eat these things they themselves are nice and clean and tasty." He licked his chops. "Well, well, there are no big crabs here, Mr. Snowman, none at all. But doubtless I will catch some perch—come, my pretty perch! come to the hook, my dears!—and my daughter-in law, the best cook in all—"

So he rattled on, while the Demigod's smile-mask stared at the cutter which, propelled by six pairs of smartly flashing oars, had pulled away from the *Grand Eunuch* and was making directly for him. He was still chattering away when the puffing Mayor, having attained the telephone, rang up a military estab-

lishment less than a mile away on the mainland, where his second 'cousin', Major General Emile Gargousse, commanded an armored division to which a battalion of atomic cannon was attached.

General Gargousse was a man of action, who had been one of the first to join Charles de Gaulle when Hitler's triumph over France and Europe had seemed assured. He could slash red tape splendidly when he wanted to, and now, having heard the Mayor's first report, he simply put through a crash priority call to Colombey-les-deux-Eglises, where the President of France was in residence, meanwhile keeping the line to Porquegan open for developments.

The President, fortunately for the world, did not trouble to call anybody until much later, after he himself had made all the necessary decisions.

Curiously, the landing of the Demigod was observed by only one man aboard the *Grand Eunuch*, a chronic liar who was gruffly ordered below as soon as he tried to tell the Second Mate about it. Lucullus Sackbutt's yacht was a majestic vessel, two hundred and twenty-five feet long, with a clipper bow, a tall stack rising out of her midships house, and the auxiliary rigging of a barkentine. She had been built during the final years of

Queen Victoria, and launched, under quite a different name, to serve as a floating seraglio for the last Sultan of the Turks. Lucullus Sackbutt, having purchased her, had converted her into an oil burner, and, at vast expense, had redone her from stem to stern as the ultimate in Oriental luxury, even replacing the Sublime Porte's rather stuffy murals with many of a far more piquant nature. Aboard her there was a large and efficient Scandinavian crew, a great Swiss chef with all his helpers, European and Asiatic, and some extraordinary personal servants. There was also a dramatic, rose-in-the teeth Contessa who occupied the office of *maitresse en titre*, and who slept with the Finnish captain. And there was, of course, Prince Alexei Alexandrovitch Tsetsedzedze, known familiarly as Poupou, whose Georgian ancestors had commanded the wild cavalry of a dozen Czars, but who had nonetheless found his way to Lucullus Sackbutt via dress-designing and interior decorating.

Half an hour before the Demigod's arrival, Mr. Sackbutt was relaxing in his bath. It was a very large bath indeed, made of precious tiles from a Moorish palace and adorned with a quite astounding fountain from Pompeii. It contained, not only its owner, but a pair of lithe, young,

naked Nubian girls, whose duty it was to wash him, and who had long since learned that nothing at all exciting was going to happen to them while at work. As they soaped, sponged, rinsed, smoothed, patted and anointed, the decently white flannelled Prince Poupou read aloud from the first chapter of his projected biography of his benefactor.

"... but it is not solely as a Patron of the Arts," he read, "that our dear Lucullus has become renowned throughout the world. No, indeed! He is our foremost arbiter of elegance, of the grand manner, of the ultimate in civilized and refined taste, walking alone, magnificent in his uniqueness, through our uncomprehending masses of dull clods. Who, having once perused it, can ever forget his epoch-making monograph, 'Wall Telephones, a Study in the Victorian and Post-Victorian Aesthetic?'—a monograph which at once changed the decor of a thousand great houses, of a hundred thousand chic apartments? Who—"

HERE Mr. Sackbutt interrupted him. "I trust, Poupou, that you have not forgotten my little book, *Brillat-Savarin the Boor?* or my two papers on the architecture of Nineteenth Century French provincial railroad stations? or how Henry VIII conferred the name of Sackbutt

upon my noble forebear, the Earl of Codpiece, because he played so mellifluously upon that instrument?" He frowned. "That last point is most important; I'm sick and tired of the press referring to me as 'heir to the made-in-Scranton Sackbutt dogfood fortune.'"

"I certainly haven't forgotten a *thing*," the prince assured him. "I've put in how you taught Mr. Onassis' chef the proper way to cook a *swan*, and all about your recreation of the old *Roman* recipes, and how you simply took San Francisco *by storm*, and how *Holiday Magazine* put out a special issue *all about you*."

"Good," said Mr. Sackbutt simply, while the Nubian girls handed him his underclothing. The mirrors which encircled him revealed nothing loose or pendulous about his plumpness. His skin was tight; his flesh was white and firm. The entire effect was one of such a solid smoothness that sometimes very young girls and middleaged Middle-western women actually mistook it for a robust masculinity.

He was assisted into his shirt and trousers. His tie was tied; his cuff-links were inserted for him. The Nubian girls knelt down to tie his spotless shoes. Then, finally, they handed him a wide and flat straw hat which would have been *au fait* at an Edwardian regatta.

Mr. Sackbutt, followed by Prince Poupou, went out on deck and, to the salutes of his stalwart mariners, descended into the sternsheets of the cutter. Nothing was said until more than half the distance to shore had been covered.

"Well!" sniffed Lucullus Sackbutt, looking at the Demigod. "In spite of what I told them, they've prepared another of those papier-mache giants for their Mardi Gras procession."

"They have no taste at all," remarked the Prince disapprovingly. "They've put up a very odd new sort of building too."

The Demigod, sitting statue-still while Papa Leminou chattered on, did nothing to disillusion them.

Finally, the boat was beached, and two pairs of sailors, leaping out into the fringes of the surf, carried their employer and his little friend the few remaining feet onto dry sand.

Mr. Sackbutt stared at the Demigod. "I'll be damned!" he said. "For once they've done a decent job of it. The thing's magnificent—not quite in perfect taste, but very *good*. Well, I suppose that mayor—whatever his name is?—imported it from Paris." His eye was caught by Mme. Bovary. "How strange!" he commented. "Fuzzy old thing, is she not?"

And it was at this instant that

the Demigod, slowly and enormously, arose and, slowly and enormously, advanced upon them.

Mr. Sackbutt's jaw dropped open.

Prince Poupou uttered a shrill scream, and suffered an unhappy accident which made it necessary for him to return to the *Grand Eunuch* as soon as he had recovered from his paralysis.

The sailors broke for the cutter, shoved off to what appeared a safe distance, and rested on uneasy oars to watch what happened next.

THE Demigod walked forward until he was a scant five yards away. Then he knelt down on one knee, folded his two vast hands, and regarded Lucullus Sackbutt with his opaque eyes.

Lucullus Sackbutt stared back at him, quivering in every member and with a vulgar perspiration tainting the unsullied band of his yachting straw. Partly because of the shock of the encounter, and partly because of the sheer splendor of the Demigod and his accoutrements, he did not panic.

Whole minutes passed. The unwitting world waited for what might come.

So did that small portion of the world which was not unwitting: the sailors, Papa Leminou, Hippolyte Ronchi, Major-General Emile Gargousse, the President

of France, and Lucullus Sackbutt himself. The now almost insen-sate Prince Poupou and poor Mme. Bovary did not count.

No one knows with certainty who, during those dreadful minutes, was first inspired to recognize a purpose behind the visit of the Demigod to Porquegnan—and if Papa Leminou had something of an edge it is only fair to say that neither Mr. Sackbutt nor the Mayor heard his comment consciously.

"Haha! my pretty," he exclaimed to the perch he was just taking off his hook. "Observe! A visitor has come to see the fat American—all the way from Tibet he is." He snickered. "Now we have two strange birds instead of one."

Almost simultaneously, a slightly more accurate version of the same idea struck Mr. Sackbutt. Though he had frequently denounced such unaesthetic activities as space travel, he at once recognized the Demigod's extra-terrestrial origin. Here was a being from another world—a being with, quite clearly, the most refined and elevated taste and a magnificent intelligence. Whom would such a being logically seek out upon the Earth? Why, his human counterpart, of course! The thought was breathtaking. It turned the tide of Mr. Sackbutt's fear, and, slowly and tremulously at first, evoked what was des-

tined to become a self-satisfaction of absolutely unparalleled proportions.

As for Hippolyte Ronchi, with the Demigod looming up before him and the President of France—who was now on the line—looming quite as impressively to his rear, it is a wonder that he managed to function rationally.

"Ronchi," said the President of France. "Hippolyte Ronchi, is it not? I have heard of you, in *la Résistance*. You are a cousin of the good Gargousse. Very well—describe this creature from another world."

The Mayor of Porquegnan gave him as good a description of the Demigod as anyone could have under the circumstances, even adding a few comments on his ship and on the possible technical level of the culture which produced it. He was interrupted twice when the President broke off to issue orders.

Then, "Very well," declared the President. "And now I want your estimate of the situation. What do you think brings this creature here—to France, to Porquegnan? Remember, this may be of ultimate importance!"

"*M-mon général*," stuttered the Mayor. "*C'est—c'est absolument incroyable!* H-he—he appears to have come to visit an American, one Lucullus Sackbut—"

"It is true, *mon général*—they seem to be communing with each other silently."

There was a great explosion of air at the other end, followed by a sigh of relief.

"Well," said the President, "if he has come to visit that one he certainly cannot be much of a menace militarily! *Alors!* We shall see. You, *mon vieux*, must be my representative. You must welcome this strange being to France in my name. Fear not for *la patrie!* Troops will be sent to prevent incidents. There will be observation posts. Wherever he may go, the great atomic cannon of your cousin will aim directly at him!"

Major-General Emile Gargousse uttered a cry of pleasure in a deep bass voice; the President, with a final word of encouragement, decisively rang off; and Hippolyte Ronchi, actually comforted for the moment by the fact that the great atomic cannon of his cousin were pointed directly at his person, took his courage in his hands and went forward to greet the Demigod in the name of France.

Meanwhile, Lucullus Sackbut had been groping for the proper terms with which to address his new acquaintance. *Maestro*, *Magister*, *Lord*, and—as some vague echo from a long-forgotten, lowly ancestor—*Squire* all came to mind. None seemed appropriate.

"WHAT?"

"Demigod!" he announced, in a voice which made up in stridency what it may have lacked in assurance, "I, Lucullus Sackbutt, welcome you to my world!"

"Sacre nom d'un pet!" exclaimed Hippolyte Ronchi *sotto voce*.

And the Demigod said nothing whatsoever.

ALMOST instantly, by order of the President, communications in and out of Porquegnan were severed. Telephone calls and telegrams were forbidden. Naval patrols swarmed into the surrounding waters. Fighter aircraft took to the skies. Elite troops and large bodies of police began arriving from the mainland to cordon off the critical area as tactfully and unobtrusively as possible. However, in spite of this, news of the Demigod's descent did leak out. Mathilde Musiault told her sister, who told the baker's boy, who told the older brother of the pharmacist, who had an amateur radio station and was able to get off a garbled and sensationalized account before his power was cut off. In half an hour, wire services and Chancelleries everywhere were buzzing anxiously, correspondents and espionage agents were homing in on Porquegnan in coveys, and a hastily organized task force of eminent scientists, scholars, and Academicians was

being rushed from Paris to counsel Mr. Sackbutt.

(The correspondents and the spies got nowhere; the former found themselves strictly censored; the latter were arrested and spirited away. The scientific and cultural specialists got nowhere either, for Lucullus Sackbutt soon made it amply evident that they were neither needed nor appreciated. All this, however, came later.)

Having pronounced his initial greeting, Mr. Sackbutt waited for the Demigod to answer—of course quite fruitlessly. Then he went on to explain that his visitor had guessed correctly, that no one could do a better job of exemplifying Man's highest aspirations and accomplishments than he, and that he would be especially glad to grant any and every wish within the province of the Muses, including those who ruled over wall telephones, provincial French railroad stations of the 19th Century, abstract ballet, and recondite gastronomy. He was about to hint that he could also provide the Demigod with a variety of pleasures less often mentioned publicly when he recalled that major differences in size and species might make the offer seem a little gauche.

He paused—and Hippolyte Ronchi, glaring at him balefully, marched forward, assumed the position of attention, and deliv-

ered his official message. In the name of the President and of the Fifth Republic, he welcomed this first traveller from the stars to the sacred soil of France. He spoke about the freedom that soil had nurtured, about the arts—here Lucullus Sackbutt frowned—and sciences which flourished there, about Roland and Charlemagne, Henri II, Diane de Poitiers, Richelieu, Louis XIV, Voltaire, Madame de Pompadour, Napoleon, and a number of other figures of historic interest. Finally, as he was harking back to Stendahl by way of Jean Cocteau and Beaudelaire, he realized that the Demigod had not once looked at him, and that he was, in fact, still fixedly regarding Mr. Sackbut. He hesitated, flushed, cleared his throat loudly several times, and finished rather lamely by saying that as Mayor he was honored and delighted to have so unusual and distinguished a visitor in Porquegnan, a town which, despite its apparent smallness, was renowned throughout Europe and America for the splendid recreational facilities it offered tourists of all tastes and classes.

THERE was silence. The Demigod and Lucullus Sackbutt appeared to be utterly wrapped up in each other. Then, scarcely turning his head, the latter said, "Be a good fellow, Ronchi, and run ahead to Madame la Mar-

quise, won't you? Tell her I'll be along as quickly as I can, and that I'm going to invite another guest. Oh, yes, and tell her that plans have changed—that it'll have to be a garden party after all." He dismissed Hippolyte Ronchi with a flutter of his hand, and turned back to the being who towered over him. "At least, Demigod," he said, "you will be spared the sight of her atrocious decor. The Marquise tries hard, I must say, but she's really very little more than a peasant girl—an Argentine, of all things." He shuddered. "Her millions come from cattle, from beef and hides."

The Demigod went on gazing at him with that slight inclination of the head which, as all observers subsequently agreed, seemed to command speech—and with which he now favored only Lucullus Sackbut. M. Ronchi, seeing it, swallowed his rage and, wisely, hurried off to the house of Madame la Marquise, pausing en route only to phone a quick report to his martial cousin.

Presently, in the most leisurely fashion imaginable, he was followed by Mr. Sackbut and the Demigod, the former conversing amiably in cultured tones, the latter moving with a majestic slowness never before seen in those parts. They were attended by a rapidly growing crowd of *agents de police*, secret service men,

small boys, adult Porquegnanais agog at the spectacle, and twittering tourists.

The reporters and the columnists did not get there until rather later, after the party was well under way, and when it already was apparent that, because of the immeasurable silence of the Demigod, Lucullus Sackbutt was almost as newsworthy as he was himself. Throughout the evening, the Demigod knelt on one knee at the garden's end, where the Marquise's pink flamingoes waded calmly among their lotus leaves, while Mr. Sackbutt, now fully reassured, lectured on the probable aesthetics of his distant world, on the artistic values inherent in the objects at his belt, and on how the beneficence of his purpose and the splendor of his intellect were clearly demonstrated by his choice of an earthly mentor.

Madame la Marquise, realizing that her social future for the next few years was now secure, backed him enthusiastically. So did Prince Poupou who, having refreshed his person, had been induced to return ashore. So did Hippolyte Ronchi, *pour la France* and because Porquegnan was obviously reaping an undreamed-of harvest of publicity. The members of the Press typed and scribbled, focussed cameras which had been carefully examined by the police, and (within strict

limits) phoned every word around the globe. Only Papa Leminou, observing the proceedings from the wall, took a less reverend attitude. The Demigod, he confided to an Iron Curtain journalist, was the Abominable Snowman, as any fool could see. Next day, several Peiping newspapers printed the story of his kidnapping by Sir Edmund Hillary, Mr. Lucullus Sackbutt, and other lackeys of British, French, and American imperialism.

FOR three days, the eyes of the entire world remained on Lucullus Sackbutt and the Demigod. During the party, Mr. Sackbutt sent to the *Grand Eunich*, and ordered that a splendid pavilion kept aboard should be brought ashore and set up beside the vessel of the Demigod. (*Figaro* reported later that it was one which had not been unfolded since the Field of the Cloth of Gold.) There he retired when the party finally broke up after three o'clock—and on the seawall behind it the Demigod kept vigil during the balance of the night. The police, the secret service operatives, the elite troops kept their vigil discreetly in the background. And, sleeplessly, Major-General Emile Gargousse kept his by his atomic cannon.

On that first day, within an hour after breakfasting, Lucullus Sackbutt and the Demigod put

the professors and Academicians firmly in their place, and impressed everyone so effectively with Mr. Sackbutt's immense importance that his program for the entertainment of the visitor was immediately accepted. The finest works of art in France were sent for to be paraded; appeals were made to all friendly governments to ship their greatest treasures to Porquegnan by air; companies of actors, ballet troupes, eminent soloists, composers, architects, all were summoned; Pablo Picasso was lifted from his studio like a Burgundian snail from its shell.

By nightfall, the Demigod had heard Lucullus Sackbutt lecture on wall telephones, steam yachts, gazebos and their place in the dream world of the Romantic Period, the sexual symbolism of the *Monitor* and *Merrimac*, Ezra Pound, the aesthetic corruption induced by the internal combustion engine, and why such people as Escoffier should never have been allowed to run so much as a hotdog stand. He had also watched Mr. Sackbutt eat three meals prepared from recipes found in the tomb of the chief cook to Caligula.

By nightfall, too, other events had taken place. Two Secret Army terrorists had attracted his attention by rushing at him with a bomb. Thereupon he had taken a curious object of bronze and gold and shifting colors from his

chatelaine and had waved it gracefully in their direction. They had quietly vanished, bomb and all, a circumstance on which the French Press commented very favorably.

Also, the Luce Publications had contracted, not only for the story of Lucullus Sackbutt's new association, but for that of his entire life as well; a movement had been started to make him an Honorary Citizen of the Fifth Republic and an Officer of the Academy; a Hollywood producer, mistakenly, had purchased the motion picture rights to his two papers on French provincial railroad stations (which eventually appeared as a sexy bit of work involving lascivious invaders from Outer Space, an overly mammalian Italian actress fourteen years old, and Dumas Père in his erotic youth); and Prince Poupou had been offered a six-weeks contract to appear in a transvestite California night-club.

The second day was very similar, though Mr. Sackbutt's menus were derived, not from the Classic world, but from old China. At luncheon, the Demigod watched him eat, among other delicacies, newly born, cage-bred mice, dipped into batter, crisply fried, and nibbled like radishes. He heard him expound the mysteries of a No Play flown over specially from Kyoto, and discuss

a German comic actress's reading-aloud of selected passages from Henry Miller and John Greenleaf Whittier. He must have noticed how his cicerone now ordered Ambassadors and Heads of State around, barked churlishly at Nobel Prize winners and important prelates, and regarded all but a handful of artists and works of art with vast contempt. But, though he paid constant and close attention, he gave no sign of interest or comprehension. The great, the powerful, the notorious he ignored.

The degree to which Lucullus Sackbutt's influence on him was obvious can best be measured by the rapid shifting of the Communist Party line toward the story. On the first day, *Pravda* screamed that the whole affair was a Capitalistic plot, hatched by Wall Street's fascist gangsters with the aid of crude machinery. On the second day, it quoted the entire Soviet Academy of Sciences as saying that undoubtedly the Demigod was an extraterrestrial Marxist who had lost his way to Moscow. On the third day, it contented itself with reprinting, under a brief but favorable introductory note, an old essay by Lucullus Sackbutt in which he had spoken quite highly of Turkoman influences in the architecture of the Magnetogorsk subway.

During this time, only three human beings remained on more or less familiar terms with Mr. Sackbutt: Prince Poupou, who was never quite ignored; Hippolyte Ronchi, who was treated courteously simply to pique his social and political superiors; and Papa Leminou, who continued to spend his days fishing from the ruined pier, and who showed no signs of realizing that his jollities and shouted greetings were being snubbed completely.

IF the Demigod had been a little more approachable, if his interest had not been so focussed on one person, and—it must be owned—if his flaunted masculinity had not been so provocative of comment, the powers that be would undoubtedly have speculated more actively on his ultimate intentions. As it was, they waited, taking things at their face value. Besides, it was infinitely easier to understand Lucullus Sackbutt, who was much more voluble and not at all averse to being quoted. From him they learned that the Demigod was not one to speak without the most careful observation; that he had weighed and judged Man in the person of Mr. Sackbutt, and that he was now applying the same process to Mankind generally; that when, in his wisdom, he felt the time had come, he would

without doubt communicate. (It was during one of these interviews with the Press of several nations that Prince Poupou first conceived his comparison about translating Mozart into the hind-leg rubbings of a cricket.)

Events proved Mr. Sackbutt to be right. Late on the afternoon of the third day, the Demigod did indeed communicate.

The morning had been taken up by such varied activities as a fashion show, a display of the perfumer's art, and a joint rump session of the Senate and Chamber of Deputies at which the Demigod was awarded the Grand Cross of the Legion d'Honneur, a Doctorate from the Sorbonne, and innumerable other accolades, all of which were accepted for him by Lucullus Sackbutt. The afternoon, however, was devoted to more important matters. The greatest chefs throughout the length and breadth of France had been brought to Porquegnan. Labors like those of Hercules had created vast outdoor kitchens stretching in a half-moon around the Demigod's green and golden vessel and Mr. Sackbutt's scarcely less magnificent pavilion. These efforts were to culminate in the greatest banquet in French history and therefore in the history of the world, a banquet which was to be served to all the eminences present, and to as many Porquegnanais and tour-

ists as could be accommodated. Reigning Monarchs, Presidents, great Ministers, and Hippolyte Ronchi—these were to feast at a special table laid at the Demigod's very feet. Lesser fry were to be accommodated up and down the beach and esplanade. For Mr. Sackbutt himself, a table had been set upon the sea-wall, directly by the Demigod.

Throughout the afternoon, the most delightful odors arose to heaven from spits and ovens, from fires of wood and gas and charcoal, from roasts great and small, from simmering ragouts, from flesh, fish, and fowl, larded and stuffed, poeled and basted, combined in a thousand ways with the most succulent vegetables, with truffles and every variety of mushroom, with stocks and wines, thick cream, and ancient brandies. It would be no exaggeration to say that Lucullus Sackbutt was, for the moment at least, the most popular man in France.

As a matter of fact, the banquet was an entire success despite the fact that he and the guest of honor did not stay for it; and it and he are fondly remembered by gourmets everywhere, who still drink to the Demigod's return.

At nightfall, torches lighted the scene. The guests assembled. White-capped and aproned, carrying such of their masterpieces

as would survive the treatment, the finest chefs of France passed in procession before the Demigod. This, Mr. Sackbutt had confided to the Prince, should certainly arouse the admiration—even the appetite perhaps—of any highly cultured being anywhere, however strange. The Demigod, he whispered, must certainly respond.

And the Demigod did.

Everyone was seated, and Hippolyte Ronchi, napkin around his neck, had just risen to deliver a short speech and propose a toast, when suddenly and enormously the Demigod stood up. Instantly, there was silence.

The Demigod inclined his head toward Lucullus Sackbutt, and moved his hand in a gesture which said, unmistakably, *Leave this and come with me*. Then, very slowly, he moved off through the assembled diners to his ship.

THRILLED to the core, Lucullus Sackbutt also stood. In full evening dress, resplendent in the Cordon of an Order conferred on him by a former King of Egypt, he surveyed the grandes' table haughtily. "You must forgive me, gentlemen," he proclaimed. "I do believe that I am to have dinner with our guest." Then, putting on his top hat, he turned and followed the vast figure.

Not a word was said. Only

Papa Leminou, out of his pier, cackled and, waving a string of fish, called out, "Where are you off to, M'sieu l'Abominable? Back to your wives and a nice little dinner in Tibet, *euh?* Yes, yes. Well, I don't blame you, my friend. I wouldn't trade these dear little perch for anything those fat-arsed Paris cooks can dish me up—"

The green and golden lattices flashed and coruscated. They opened for the Demigod. He held out one hand, permitted Mr. Sackbutt to stand on it, lifted him in; then went in himself. The vessel closed. There was a torrent, a fountain, a geyser of cold fire.

And Porquegnan was very far behind.

Presently, Lucullus Sackbutt followed the Demigod through trellises and arches and panels forged of light into a great chamber, jeweled and faceted. At its center a crystal table grew. Upon it was a bowl of porphyry, a golden knife and fork, a plate of veined jade, and a large translucent instrument.

The Demigod sat down upon a floating throne. On his open palm, he lifted Mr. Sackbutt to the table-top. He gestured to him to take off his clothes, and Lucullus Sackbutt, remembering his host's astounding nakedness, politely did so—while the huge bowl was filled invisibly with a rich and fragrant sauce, a sauce which his

delicate nostrils informed him was superior to any he had ever tasted. His heart hammered in triumph at the thought that he, of all the people in the world, had been chosen to share so exquisite a meal.

"I thank you, Demigod," he said. "You greatly honor me. But tell me, mightn't I have some smaller sort of plate?" And he made gestures to convey the thought.

The Demigod regarded him with his impenetrable yes. He took him by the neck between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand. With his right, he reached for the translucent instrument. It resembled both a duck-press and a nutcracker.

Then, at long last, he spoke. His voice sounded not at all like Mozart and Moliere and the Higher Mathematics translated into the hind-leg rubbings of a

cricket. Instead—though infinitely deeper, infinitely slower—it was very much like Papa Lemino's. Nor does it matter what its language was.

"What firm flesh you have, little white creature," remarked the Demigod. "And tasty too, I should imagine, in spite of everything. My, how you squeak! Well, one never knows, I always say. Why, just a moment ago it seemed as if you wanted to eat with me—fancy that! Do you think that I would have you feeding at my table?" He placed the instrument upon his plate. The faintest flicker of disgust crossed his immobile features. "No, no, my pretty one," he said. "You eat dead things."

The jaws of the translucent instrument closed gently around Lucullus Sackbutt, and the Demigod picked up his knife and fork.

THE END

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THE SPECTROSCOPE

By ROBERT SILVERBERG



Doctor to the Stars, by Murray Leinster. 176 pages. Pyramid Books, 40¢.

About ten years ago, when I was a new and very young science fiction writer, I happened to submit a story to s-f's most experienced and revered editor, John W. Campbell. A few days later, I called up to get the verdict, and was told it was No Sale. Campbell liked the idea very much—but something was wrong with the plot, and (with all his years of editorial experience) he could not quite put his finger on the flaw.

I went to his office to pick up the script. The man who writes under the name of Murray Leinster was there, on some business of his own. As I took the rejected yarn and started to put it away, Leinster said, "Let me see that."

He leafed through it, reading perhaps every third page, finished it, nodded, and told me exactly what was wrong with it as a story. Looking over at Campbell, he said softly, "Wouldn't you agree, John?"

Right then and there, on the office typewriter, I wrote two new pages to mend the story according to Leinster's suggestion. Campbell read them, and bought the story. I relate this personal episode not so much to demonstrate Murray Leinster's generosity as a human being—why, after all, should he spend half an hour of his day bothering with somebody else's rejected story?—as to indicate the depth of his craftsmanship as a writer. A quick skimming told him where I had gone astray—for Murray Leinster, whose career as a story-

teller extends back nearly half a century, knows as much about how fiction is made as any living man.

Here are three Leinster novelets, part of the "Med Service" series that has been appearing in various magazines, including this one, over the past few years. They, too, indicate the Leinster craftsmanship. Indeed, craftsmanship is their prime virtue. They are not really memorable science fiction stories. The prose is bland; the characterization is negligible; worst of all, they are not really *about* anything. (As Leinster's own classic "First Contact" is about something—the problem of communication between strangers.) Nothing here challenges the mind as a James Blish story challenges the mind, nor is there the poetry and psychological richness of a Sturgeon, the felicity of prose of a Damon Knight, the dazzle of an Alfred Bester. They are simply good stories, marvelously well put together.

The three are "The Grandfathers' War," from ASTOUNDING of 1957; "Tallien Three," which was "The Hate Disease" in ANALOG last year; and "Med Ship Man," from a 1963 GALAXY. All three deal with one Calhoun, a roving agent of the Interstellar Medical Service. The formula is the same: Calhoun (accompanied only by a squirrel-like alien pet,

Murgatroyd) arrives at an alien planet, finds strange goings-on, and sets the situation aright.

Calhoun is hardly more than a stick-figure. Does he ever feel lonely? Does he have intellectual interests? Was he an only child? Leinster never tells us. Calhoun exists only as a solver of puzzles. Murgatroyd—who sometimes gets too cute for this reader's taste—chiefly serves the technical function in the stories of giving Calhoun someone to talk to, but he is always an integral part of the plot as well as merely a companion. (Craftsmanship, again: nothing is introduced which does not figure into the plot.)

In each story, the puzzle is set up fairly and solved fairly. Leinster never resorts to mumbo-jumbo or magic; he has always been a practitioner of science-fiction, and he works his rationales out conscientiously. The one flaw in the storytelling is his habit of getting each significant plot-datum across three or four times, if not more often; but this at least serves to keep the reader reminded of the story's basics. I don't think any of these Med Service yarns will live down the ages—but I recommend them most heartily, all the same. It's a pleasure to watch such a masterly craftsman at work, producing a couple of hours of diverting reading with unfailing skill.

Tales of Three Planets, by Edgar Rice Burroughs. 282 pages. Canaveral Press, \$3.50.

The Burroughs boom goes booming on. Canaveral Press, an offshoot of a New York antiquarian book store, has been engaged for the past few years in producing a series of Burroughs hardcovers, paralleling the paperback books being produced in such abundance by Ace and Ballantine. Though there is still some distance to go before Canaveral has a complete list to offer, the company has already begun deviating from the standard Tarzan-Mars-Venus-Pellucidar lines to produce some offbeat Burroughs material.

My opinion of The Master's literary abilities is already on record in these pages, and I won't belabor the point again. Most of the stuff strikes me as silly and crude, and I am endlessly awed by the size of Burroughs' legion of admirers. For those who like this sort of thing, though, well, this is the sort of thing they will like—in spades. For here are three long E.R.B. novelets, one of them long enough to be considered a novel, and much of the material is heretofore unpublished.

The longest of the three is "Beyond the Farthest Star," part of which first appeared in a pulp adventure magazine some twenty-odd years ago. (The copyright

line does not help to identify the original source, and editor Richard Lupoff, in his generally useful preface to the book, neglects to supply the information.) Perhaps "Beyond the Farthest Star" was first published in ARGOSY or ADVENTURE; certainly it was in none of the regular science fiction magazines. It takes place on a world called Poloda, 450,000 light-years from Earth, but the flavor is very much that of the John Carter on Mars stories with a different set of critters. It was heartwarming to see that Burroughs, not generally noted for his mastery of abstruse concepts, was aware that a light-year was a measure of distance and not of time.

Appended to "Beyond the Farthest Star" is a sequel, previously unpublished, called "Tangor Returns." It fits right on to the earlier story—and such is the nature of Burroughs' plotting that an infinite series of novelets could have been attached at the other end.

The second section of the book provides "The Resurrection of Jimber Jaw," from ARGOSY of 1935. This is Burroughs in a Jack Londony mood, telling the story of a thawed-out caveman. Not a bad job, particularly measured against the usual Burroughs performance.

Lastly, we have "The Wizard of Venus," never before pub-

lished—a Carson of Venus adventure, apparently the opening section of an unfinished novel. The Carson of Venus stories are lighthearted and pleasantly foolish—I suspect they were meant as parodies of Burroughs' Martian stories—and this one is as trivial and momentarily diverting as the rest.

An interesting feature of the book is a section of Burroughs' background material on the planet of Poloda—an alphabet, maps, numbers, and other odds and ends. It's a kind of halfwit version of the sort of thing Hal

Clement does so brilliantly, and is not without a certain naive charm of its own. The arrangement of the Polodan solar system, with eleven planets all in the same orbit around the star Omos, strikes me as astronomically unlikely but definitely ingenious.

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EDITORIAL

(Continued from page 5)

were better fitted to survive. *Homo sapiens* replaced other homonoids because he was (presumably) smarter and tougher. Earth life will supplant Mars life if it can. There's nothing biologically wrong with this. On the moral plane, I'm sure man will take great pains to protect Martian life forms, no matter what else he does on Mars. So where's the sin?

Finally, if Mr. Lobsenz likes to worry about the underdog, Mars is going to have the upper hand over man for quite some time to come. It's going to take plenty of skill and guts to survive there. The scope and costs of planetary engineering will be so large that it will make Project APOLLO look like a pickup softball game. So large, in fact, that we'll have to be extremely careful about all the details . . . including the care and feeding of the natives. Now, if Mars harbors any microbes that can prey on men, do you think they'd be so considerate?

I don't think we need more humility; the tasks we're engaged in are humbling enough. We might use a little more appreciation for man's place in this here universe, though, and a little more faith in his judgement."

Ben Bova

I GUESS I shouldn't be baited so easily, but what editor can resist arguing with a writer (and vice versa). I don't think that "it's up to the men who get to Mars to decide what they want to do with it." I don't think Mr. Bova would feel that way if, suddenly, the Russians got to Mars first. Seems to me it is up to the people of earth, or—at the very least—the people whose taxes paid for the trip, to decide. Of course my basic feeling is that, if there is intelligent life on Mars, that life should retain the right of decision over the future of its own world. (Suppose the Martians came here and decided to Mars-form Earth?)

Mr. Bova's "compelling" reasons to terraform Mars will be "compelling" only in terms of man's needs—the usual selfish, morally short-sighted view. (Of course my editorial was based on the possibility of finding *some* intelligent life on Mars. I am not opposed to terraforming a planet inhabited only by germs or vegetables—unless they have minds of their own.)

The rest of Mr. Bova's arguments are typically egotistical, species-wise. We rule the earth because we are the bestest thing that has come along. Mr. Bova is forgetting those two little words, "so far." Also, I have my doubts about whether we are so

fit to rule Earth, or any planet. The mess we have made here is evidence enough.

And Mr. Bova's last comment, about Mars having the "upper hand," is also indicative of the childish a-morality which passes these days for reasoning. Because it's going to cost us so much money to get to Mars, by God we can do whatever we like when we get there! And Mr. Bova doesn't think we need more humility. He's right. We don't have any at all now. We need *some* humility. Even a little would help.

As for man's place in the universe, it is in my opinion utterly accidental, irrelevant, and immaterial. What's to appreciate? That we have fouled our own planet's soil, water and air? That we have no hesitation in risking the same fouling of our satellite, or other worlds and even of the spaces between them? That many officials (and ordinary folk), view space exploration largely as a matter of military expediency?

I am not insulted—as I think I am supposed to be—by being accused of making moral judgements. I only wish others—millions of others, leaders of men—would start making moral judgements too. Perhaps that's what mankind needs: to survive: less terraforming and more moral judgements.

N.L.



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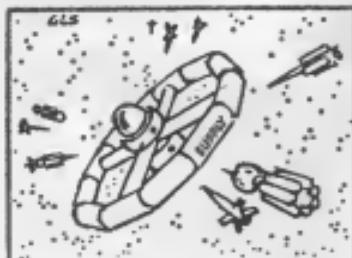
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